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Transcendence in Resilient American POWs: A Narrative Analysis

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Transcendence in Resilient American POWs: A Narrative Analysis

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What is it about some American service members that enable them to bounce back from something like a POW experience, which may include daily conditions like filth, disease, starvation, torture, murder, and unscrupulous behavior among fellow prisoners and guards? Is it possible to transcend those experiences and make meaning of them in ways that allows one to heal and move on? How does one survive these stressors and manage to do things well, like get married, have a family, and live a productive life for decades after the traumatic experience? This study explores these questions.

Transcendence is an under-appreciated aspect of human experience with potentially significant positive contributions to the study of “spiritual fitness” and resilience in the military,¹ two factors attributed to successful navigation of the military life cycle. Transcendence, as a possible influencer of resilience, can be tracked in various forms, including narrative. I propose that resilient American service members who survived and bounced back from something like a POW experience, and who wrote about it later, left traces of transcendence in their stories, which can be studied.

I also propose that transcendence is an experiential meaning-making process, rather than an event or state of being. In my model of transcendence there are at least two possible outcomes. The first outcome, stabilization of one’s sense of self, enables the person to more

¹ M.G. Mullen (Admiral, US Navy), “Chairman’s Total Force Fitness Framework,” CJCSI 3405.01, J-7 (1 September 2011).

firmly root him or herself in a response to the question, “What am I?” The second outcome, extraordinary connections within and beyond the self, in space-time, gives the person coordinates in moral space and allows the person to draw from those coordinates in future situations, particularly those that might be morally hazardous.

Eight memoirs of American POWs from two time periods were analyzed: World War II and the Vietnam War. The memoirs were selected based on public availability and known resilience of POW survivors (no known attempt to commit suicide within five years of discharge). Evidence was found for transcendence as meaning-making process and for the outcomes proposed.

This dissertation by Cabrini Pak fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in Religion and Culture approved by William Barbieri, Ph.D. as Director, and by Raymond Studzinski, OSB, Ph.D. and Stephen Rossetti, Ph.D., as Readers.

William Barbieri, Ph.D., Director

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DEDICATION

To Father Vincent R. Capodanno, MM, US Navy Chaplain, KIA, and Father Emil Kapaun, US Army Chaplain, POW, both also Medal of Honor recipients: thank you for your life and example. Your ultimate sacrifice transcended the horrors of war and inspired those whom you left behind. Please give my love to Francis Benedicta, a peace maker who died too young, to whom I also dedicate this work.

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Part I: Background

Imagine that two American airmen, one enlisted, the other an officer, are being held in separate German POW camps during World War II for between eight months and just over one year. Both survive and are eventually released. One goes on to serve as a police officer and a Democratic state representative in Massachusetts, while the other continues to serve in the military for nearly 27 years and retires with numerous decorations. Both appear to have survived and bounced back from their experiences when writing about their experiences many years later.

Imagine again that three American service members from different branches of the military are captured and held in Japanese-run POW camps during World War II, with two of them having survived the Bataan Death March in the Philippines. All three are forced into hard labor and generally appear to experience more severe conditions than their counterparts in the German-run POW camps. They spend from three to four years as prisoners and are eventually released. One goes on to shape a famous survival school, which is still in use today to train service members to “survive in isolation, making them a less vulnerable target to the enemy.”¹ Another serves as a police officer and then as an investigator for the District Attorney of Suffolk County in New York, and eventually as an assistant professor at St. Petersburg Junior College. A third serves as a warrant officer and eventually transitions to civilian life, doing contract work for the government.

Finally, imagine that three American service members from different branches of the military are captured and held in different locations in Vietnam during the Vietnam War for periods of between five and six years. All three are tortured and subjected to indoctrination by

¹ Capt. Erik Olsen, “SERE training develops leaders for complex environment,” United States Army website, November 21, 2014, accessed Jun 16, 2017, https://www.army.mil/article/138765/SERE_training_develops_leaders_for_complex_environment.

their captors, and two reach their “breaking points” under torture. One escapes just before being executed, and the other two are eventually released. One of the survivors, the one who escaped, also goes on to shape the future of the aforementioned survival school, and the other two continue serving for a time before holding public office as senators. Again, all of these American former POWs appear to have bounced back and gone on to live productive lives. All but one of the survivors described in these three scenarios live past eighty years, and those that pass away beyond the age of eighty die of natural causes.

What is it about some American service members that enable them to bounce back from the rigors of a POW experience, which may include daily conditions like filth, disease, starvation, torture, murder, and unscrupulous behavior among fellow prisoners and guards? Is it possible to transcend such experiences and make meaning of them in ways that allows one to heal and move on? How does one survive these stressors and manage to do things well, like get married, have a family, and live a productive life for decades after the traumatic experience? It is these sorts of questions that this study is designed to explore.

A significant challenge facing our American military service members is maintaining a stable, resilient sense of identity while transitioning between highly discontinuous settings or contexts. An extreme example of such a transition is capture by enemy forces, survival of a prisoner of war (POW) experience, and release or escape. The POW experience represents an example of a “worst-case-scenario” facing every service member entering both war and “operations other than war.”²

² Donna Miles, (Maj), “Code of Conduct: Guide to Keeping the Faith,” *DoD News*, April 27, 1999, US Dept. of Defense, accessed Nov. 4, 2016, <http://archive.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=42786>.

POWs often face a period of what can be called “pathological normalcy,”³ in which they become familiar with disease, filth, death, murder, torture, abuse, addiction, or lack of basic needs. In addition, they may encounter unscrupulous behavior by fellow POWs, medics, guards, and locals. Erikson (1959) argues that war can be “an unfair test to ego strength,”⁴ mobilizing emotional and material resources without regard for what is workable and economical under normal conditions of long range development. Yet, despite this test to ego strength, many not only survive the experience but even thrive later in life. The conditions of war, and more specifically, a POW experience, precipitate both transcendent and anti-transcendent moments together, in a paradoxical brew of human existence. World War II and the Vietnam War are two periods about which POW accounts have been written. American service members in WWII and Vietnam, while studied and written about in voluminous detail,⁵ have yet to be studied regarding the role of transcendence in surviving traumatic experiences.

Why study transcendence, and what does this have to do with our service members? I propose in my study that there are at least two outcomes of transcendence as an experiential process, whereby meaning is successfully established regarding significant, personally relevant events, both positive and negative. The first outcome, stabilization of one’s sense of self, enables the person to more firmly root him or herself in a response to the question, “What am I?” The second outcome, extraordinary connections within and beyond the self, in space-time, gives the person coordinates in moral space and allows the person to draw from those coordinates in future

³ Keziah Conrad, “Dwelling in the Place of Devastation: Transcendence and the Everyday Recovery from Trauma,” *Anthropological Theory* 14 (2014): 74 – 91.

⁴ Erikson, “Identity and the Life Cycle: Selected Papers,” in *Psychological Issues* 1 (1959): Monograph 1.

⁵ Samuel A. Stouffer et al, “The American Soldier: Adjustment During Army Life, Vol. 1.” *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association* 140:14 (1949): 1189; Stuart I. Rochester and Frederick Kiley, *Honor Bound: The History of American Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia, 1961 – 1973* (Washington DC: Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 1998).

situations, particularly those that might be morally challenging. By coordinates I mean that the extraordinary connections are positioned in a way that allows the person to reference them relative to his or her *axis mundi*. Mircea Eliade describes how *homo religiosus* builds a system of orientation, or *axis mundi*, in time/space, by defining that which is “sacred.”⁶ Although this study does not presume a religious orientation in the memoirists studied as Eliade did of his subjects, one could argue that that an aspect of “sacredness” for these memoirists may include the extraordinary connections formed within and beyond the self after making meaning of an event that was extraordinary and personally relevant. This shapes moral orientation, and the axis itself is shaped by a sense of identity. Moral orientation in turn influences how an individual navigates highly discontinuous settings or contexts.

The outcomes of transcendence, stabilization of one’s sense of self, and extraordinary connections within and beyond the self, can have a second-order effect on another concept that military leaders and psychologists are pursuing today: resilience, or the ability to bounce back from adversity. Resilience can serve as a protective factor against the kinds of stressors our service members often face, whether it is the constant moving after each new assignment, combat or deployment stress, stressors on family life, or the process of separation from the military and reintegration into civilian life.

Transcendence, as a possible influencer of resilience, can be tracked in various forms, including narrative. I propose that resilient service members who survived and bounced back from something like a POW experience, and who wrote about it later, left traces of transcendence in their stories, which can be studied. Transcendence is an under-appreciated aspect of human experience with potentially significant positive contributions to the study of

⁶ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1959).

“spiritual fitness” and resilience in the military,⁷ two factors attributed to successful navigation of the military life cycle. Transcendence, which can broadly be associated with an experiential meaning-making process that forms extraordinary connections within oneself and with others, in time and space, can create anchors to which people attach themselves. Meaning can be made of both the everyday and of the extraordinary. Anti-transcendence, a potentially self-disintegrating phenomenon, and part of the paradox of the POW experience, receives virtually no attention in the literature. Anti-transcendent experiences would serve as an antonym to transcendent experiences. For example, if a transcendent experience helps one form extraordinary connections with fellow POWs and even the prison environment, an anti-transcendent experience is one which triggers a contraction of the self or recoiling from fellow POWs and the prison environment.

Those that survive a POW experience and are liberated must eventually sort through the collection of paradoxical moments and place them into a structure of meaning. One way this is accomplished is through the writing of a memoir. As people tell their lives in storied form, they also illustrate a process of meaning-making, “connecting and integrating the chaos of internal and momentary experience...and structuring the flow of experience.”⁸ Creative expression (like memoir writing) “encourages self-reflection, increased awareness, insight, discernment, compassion, and mindfulness,” leading to a deeper understanding of the meaning of transcendent experiences and the role(s) they play in people’s lives.⁹ Religiousness and

⁷ M.G. Mullen (Admiral, US Navy), “Chairman’s Total Force Fitness Framework,” CJCSI 3405.01, J-7 (1 September 2011).

⁸ Ruthellen Josselson, “Narrative Research: Constructing, Deconstructing, and Reconstructing Story,” in Wertz, Frederick J., et al, *Five Ways of Doing Qualitative Analysis: Phenomenological Psychology, Grounded Theory, Discourse Analysis, Narrative Research, and Intuitive Inquiry* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2011).

⁹ Diana Raab, “Creative Transcendence: Memoir Writing for Transformation and Empowerment,” *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 46 (2014): 187-207.

spirituality may also inform narratives that facilitate the integration of traumatic events to alleviate post-traumatic symptoms.¹⁰ Analysis of these memoirs may provide insight into how resilient American service members survive traumas like a POW experience.

This will be a qualitative, descriptive study. I will analyze eight memoirs of American POWs from two time periods: World War II and the Vietnam War. The memoirs were selected with the following criteria in mind: a) public availability; and b) known resilience of POW survivors (no known attempt to commit suicide within five years of discharge). Accounts are taken from service members in all three branches: Army, Navy (which includes the Marine Corps), and Air Force. Coast Guard is not included since there were only four recorded POWs during World War II and no recorded POWs during the Vietnam War. All but three authors have since died, at an average age of 80 years old, most from natural causes or disease. One was assassinated (Rowe). The World War II memoirs covered POW camps run by two countries: Germany and Japan. Vietnam War POWs were held in North and South Vietnam. The average age at capture of the WWII veterans studied was 21 years. The average age at capture of Vietnam War veterans was 30 years. Although the primary selection criteria for the memoirs were public availability and known resilience of the service members, this study will also capture the role played (or not) by religion and cultural values in the authors' experiences of transcendence in making meaning of their lives before and during captivity, as well as after release or escape.

The first part of the dissertation will provide biographical contexts for each of the memoir writers, with special attention to historical and military context, the timing of their capture, length of captivity, release or escape, years in active duty, publicly available

¹⁰ Julio F.P. Peres et al, "Spirituality and Resilience in Trauma Victims," *J. Relig. Health* 46 (2007): 343 – 350.

biographical information, the timing of their memoir authorship, and narrative style. The second part will provide a preliminary introduction to the concepts of transcendence and anti-transcendence, narrowing the focus to the POW context. The third part will analyze the memoirs and report findings. Narrative analysis will be used to qualitatively explore the memoirs, with special attention to narrative structure,¹¹ correspondence of descriptions of transcendent and anti-transcendent experiences across authors, and coherence of concepts and themes associated with the two types of experiences.¹² A database of narrative fragments for each narrator will be populated and analyzed that include key words and phrases reflecting experiences of transcendence (and its opposites) before capture, during captivity, or after release, depending on the memoirists. For example, some memoirists cluster their experiences of transcendence in one period and not another (like during captivity or after release, but not necessarily both). The database will include narrative fragments such as: how narrators integrate past/future to make meaning for the present (or not); encounters with death or near-death, either themselves or others nearby; will to live (or lack); awareness (or lack) of their own values, philosophy, aspirations; interpersonal connections (or lack thereof); connecting with (vs. recoiling from) environment. I will analyze the fragments based on the database that I populated. The narratives will also be compared with each other, both at the narrative fragment level and their more holistic narrative structures. The fourth part will update the concepts of transcendence and anti-transcendence based on the findings in the memoir analysis and conclude with implications and directions for future research.

¹¹ Jean Calloud, *Structural Analysis of Narrative*, Trans. Daniel Patte (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976).

¹² Catherine Kohler Riessman, *Narrative Analysis, Qualitative Research Methods Series 30* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1993).

Although war veterans have often been studied in clinical detail for risk factors like depression, PTSD, suicidal ideation, and related disorders, very little has been done by way of narrative analysis of the memoirs of veterans with known resilience from a particularly traumatic experience, like a POW experience. A study of the role of transcendence in these veterans, especially in their first-person accounts, may contribute to a more balanced and positive understanding of resilience of the military service member, the cultural role of transcendence as a therapeutic mechanism, as well as the potentially therapeutic effect of memoir writing in making sense of the “pathological normalcy” of war.

Context

The purpose of this section is to provide relevant historical and biographical context to the American POW experiences studied in this study. Since it is a qualitative study of a small selection of works, historical context of the authors’ time periods and war experiences will help put the analysis into a broader perspective. Biographical sketches of the authors may help trace some of the potential idiosyncrasies found in the memoir analyses back to the person, serving as a filter for signature expressions more particular to the person than the time or culture. The background section will be divided into three parts. The first part will briefly discuss the historical context of the wars and American military culture and values. The second part discusses the POW experience relevant to World War II and Vietnam in broad strokes. The third section will provide biographical sketches of the memoir writers studied in this study.

The Wars and American Military Culture and Values

This section will introduce the different ways in which the two wars started and ended, describe American military culture and values in each period, and discuss connections between these frameworks and the memoir writers studied in this study.

The beginnings of World War II and the Vietnam War exhibited very different qualities. On December 8, 1941, the day after Japan's attack on the United States at Pearl Harbor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt delivered his famous "Day of Infamy" speech. "No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion," he said, "the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory."¹³ Upon requesting War Declaration 125, he asserted that "we will not only defend ourselves to the uttermost but will make it very certain that this form of treachery shall never again endanger us."¹⁴ Thus the United States entered World War II. There appeared to be no ambiguity about the call to arms, and the American people obeyed the draft that soon followed. Truman's radio address on September 1, 1945 reflected a similar clarity of sentiment at the conclusion of the Second World War: "As President of the United States, I proclaim Sunday, September the second, 1945, to be V-J Day--the day of formal surrender by Japan...it is a day which we Americans shall always remember as a day of retribution--as we remember that other day, the day of infamy."¹⁵

¹³ "Speech by Franklin D. Roosevelt New York (Transcript)," *Library of Congress website*, https://www.loc.gov/resource/afc1986022.afc1986022_ms2201/?st=text, accessed 1/25/17.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ "122. Radio Address to the American People After the Signing of the Terms of Unconditional Surrender by Japan," Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, September 1, 1945, accessed Feb. 4, 2017, <https://www.trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php?pid=129>.

In contrast, Robert McNamara reflected on America's involvement in the Vietnam War, during which time he served as the Secretary of Defense:¹⁶

It was just...confusion, and events afterwards showed that our judgement that we had been attacked that day was wrong. Didn't happen. [President Johnson] authorized the attack on the assumption that the second attack had occurred and his belief that it was a conscious decision on the part of the North Vietnamese political and military leaders to escalate the conflict and...they would not stop short of winning. We were wrong...

In the case of Vietnam...there were total misunderstandings. They believed we had simply replaced the French as a colonial power, and we were seeking to subject the south and north Vietnam to our colonial interests. And we saw Vietnam as an element of the Cold War, not what they saw it as, a civil war.

Not only was there confusion within the administration about what was happening in Vietnam, the anti-war movement and draft resistance in the United States created a conflicted climate regarding the ethics of American involvement in the Vietnam War. The differing attitudes of the American public about World War II and the Vietnam War would later affect veterans returning home,¹⁷ as may also be reflected by the presence (or absence) of homecoming memories by the POW memoir writers after their respective wars.

Lt. Col. David Grossman¹⁸ and Jonathan Shay¹⁹ both agree that something went wrong with how Vietnam veterans experienced war, were received back into society, and were inadequately treated (clinically), leading to depression, psychological casualties, and moral injury. Grossman argued that rationalization of killing in war as a necessary part of soldier formation failed. Vietnam-era veterans did not have the benefit of the reassuring presence of

¹⁶ Julie Ahlberg, *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*. Free Documentaries website. Directed by Errol Morris. Sony Pictures Classics, 2003.

¹⁷ Robert M. Wilson et al, "Military Veterans Sharing First-Person Stories of War and Homecoming: A Pathway to Social Engagement, Personal Healing, and Public Understanding of Veterans' Issues," *Smith College Studies in Social Work* 79 (2009): 392 – 432.

¹⁸ David Grossman, Lt. Col., *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (New York: Back Bay Books, 1995).

¹⁹ Jonathan Shay, MD/Ph.D., *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Scribner, 1994).

older, more experienced service members that would have helped them rationalize the killing, accept what they did, and move on, as compared with World War II veterans.²⁰

American military culture and values were most often incorporated into basic training, or “boot camp.” During boot camp, the Code of Conduct (post-Korean War) and respective branch creeds (or rudimentary precursors) were part of the inculcation process. Values specific to each branch were also embedded in recruit training. For example, today the Marine Corps Core Values are “Honor, Courage, Commitment,” guided by the motto “Semper Fidelis” (Always Faithful) and the principle “*Ductus Exemplo*” (Lead by Example).²¹ Army values are “Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage.”²² Air Force values are “Integrity First, Service before Self, and Excellence in All We Do.”²³ Although the formulations may have changed over time, each branch of the military had its own “personalities and motivations characteristic of the institution,” which were communicated via rituals and traditions that yielded distinct and enduring personalities.²⁴

There were differences in preparation for enduring captivity between the two war periods, marked by the presence (or absence) of the Code of Conduct. The “Code of Conduct for Members of the Armed Forces of the United States,” published in November of 1955 by the Department of Defense, was arguably the POW’s single most important document.²⁵ American POW experiences during the Korean War, from their capture to repatriation processes, triggered a review and report by the Defense Advisory Committee on Prisoners of War. They concluded

²⁰ Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, 264 - 283.

²¹ “Principles & Values,” *US Marine Corps website*, accessed 4/10/15, <http://www.marines.com/history-heritage/principles-values>.

²² “The Army Values,” *The Official Homepage of the United States Army*, accessed 4/10/15, <http://www.army.mil/values/>.

²³ “Our Values,” *US Air Force website*, accessed 4/10/15, <http://www.airforce.com/learn-about/our-values/>.

²⁴ Carl H. Builder, *The Masks of War* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

²⁵ Craig Howes, *Voices of the Vietnam POWs: Witnesses to Their Fight* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993): 17.

that “Americans require a unified and purposeful standard of conduct for our prisoners of war backed up by a first class training program,”²⁶ which Vietnam veterans received but World War II veterans did not. As a result the Vietnam veterans had the Code of Conduct as a potential anchor to affirm their identity as American service members and ensure compliance to norms when they were captured, while the World War II veterans could only refer to the captors’ requirements to comply with the Geneva Conventions.

Social conditions for black Americans during World War II and afterward are worth noting here, since one of the memoir writers studied in this period was a Tuskegee airman (Alexander Jefferson). Racism within the US context was expressed in many forms, including segregation and systematic biases against blacks in hiring and education testing. This was also practiced within the US Armed Forces.²⁷ George White, Jr. noted that the Army’s testing regime was not “race-neutral” but rather a “critical component of institutional racism that reflected the wider manifestations of ‘White privilege’ in mid-20th century America.”²⁸ As a result the chances that a black soldier could ever become an officer were low, since most fell into categories that precluded that opportunity.

Homecoming for black American veterans after World War II, especially POWs, was bittersweet. Andrew Kersten (2002) noted that World War II was “an unprecedented era in which African Americans sought a “Double V,” a victory over fascism abroad and apartheid at home.”²⁹ Yet, even after blacks returned victorious from the War, the racial divide persisted. The GI Bill, for example, exacerbated the gap between blacks and whites in higher education. Large

²⁶ Department of Defense. *The US Fighting Man’s CODE* (Washington, DC: Office of the Armed Forces Information and Education, 1955): vii.

²⁷ George White, Jr., “‘I Am Teaching Some of The Boys:’ Chaplain Robert Boston Dokes and Army Testing of Black Soldiers in World War II,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 81:3 (Summer 2012).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Andrew E. Kersten, “African Americans and World War II,” *OAH Magazine of History* 16:3 (Spring 2002): 13 – 17.

state universities in the South remained closed to blacks in the post-World War II period, and state legislation did not meet demand for more spaces for black students. The situation in the North was marginally better for black veterans, but since most enlisted black men were from the South, the benefit may only have been realized in small numbers.³⁰ The housing crisis of the 1940s hit American urban black communities the hardest, exacerbating the situation for black veterans. Jeffrey Gonda noted that several groups of people developed and maintained what could be called a social structure of housing discrimination, using violence, racially discriminatory standards in lending and mortgage, and restrictive covenants. These practices included individuals, realtors, mortgage lenders, and the government (e.g., FHA, federal, state, and municipal government actors).³¹

Shay noted that American Vietnam veterans experienced two wars: a) the one in Vietnam; b) one internally between blacks and whites.³² Many blacks mused as to whether the Vietnam War was a method of reducing the black population in America. For example, the “rear” of the line, often where the dead or injured were placed, was supposed to be a safe place, but Shay noted that blacks feared for their safety because of the racial prejudice that ran deep into the ranks then.³³ Lyle Dorsett noticed the same problem in World War II veterans (esp. Navy), which included the chaplaincy. For example, the Navy chaplains were slower to desegregate than the Army chaplains, which sent different messages to the troops they ministered to.³⁴ Anti-locutions against blacks were plentiful and became triggers for further violence during

³⁰ The JBHE Foundation, Inc., “How the GI Bill Widened the Racial Higher Education Gap,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, No. 41 (Autumn, 2003): 36 – 37.

³¹ Jeffrey D. Gonda, *Unjust Deeds: The Restrictive Covenant Cases and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

³² Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, 60.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Lyle Dorsett, *Serving God and Country: United States Military Chaplains in WWII* (New York: The Penguin Group, 2012).

both eras. Gordon Allport (1958) warned that anti-locutions, the first notable behavior in prejudicial action, could escalate to violence if not properly addressed.³⁵

The World War II POW memoir writers generally recalled a positive reception in their work, except for Jefferson, who remarked that his indescribable jubilation at docking in New York was met with a jarring return to racism as “a short, smug, white buck private shouted, ‘Whites to the right, niggers to the left.’”³⁶ In contrast, only one of the Vietnam POW writers wrote about his reception and support: John McCain. He wrote:³⁷

I've received scores of letters from young people, and many of them sent me POW bracelets with my name on it, which they had been wearing. Some were not too sure about the war, but they are strongly patriotic, their values are good, and I think we will find that they are going to grow up to be better Americans than many of us. This outpouring on behalf of us who were prisoners of war is staggering, and a little embarrassing because basically we feel that we are just average American Navy, Marine and Air Force pilots who got shot down.

The next section will discuss the American POW experience in World War II and Vietnam, with some high-level observations across the time periods, and some more specific insights into each one.

The American POW Experience in World War II and Vietnam

The POW camps described by the memoir writers were run by either the Germans or the Japanese during World War II or by the Vietcong/North Vietnamese during the Vietnam War. Locations varied for American POWs, sometimes by branch (airmen vs. ground troops) and

³⁵ Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1958).

³⁶ Alexander Jefferson, with Lewis H. Carlson. *Red Tail Captured, Red Tail Free* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005): 107.

³⁷ John S. McCain, “John McCain, Prisoner of War: A First-Person Account,” *US News & World Report*, Jan. 28, 2008, accessed Feb. 4, 2017, <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2008/01/28/john-mccain-prisoner-of-war-a-first-person-account>.

other times as part of a more complex process (e.g., *Dalag Luft* to other German camps;³⁸ Philippines to Japan;³⁹ North China locations;⁴⁰ and various locations in Vietnam⁴¹).

In a survey of POWs in 20th century wars, Neufeld and Watson (2013) noted that neither Japan during World War II nor North Vietnam during the Vietnam War observed the Geneva Convention provisions with respect to their captives.⁴² Although France and Germany did sign the Geneva Convention, the authors note that treatment of each other's prisoners often violated the treaty. The Germans "generally observed" the Geneva Convention, and the authors refer to a House of Representatives committee report that concluded that they treated the American POWs well because the US treated their German POWs well.⁴³ The American POW death rate in Germany was 1% (N=168), contrasted with the nearly 40% death rate (N=11,000) of American POWs imprisoned by Japan. Neufeld and Watson cited Japan's code of Bushido as a possible reason for the horrific treatment of captured service members ("death in battle brought the highest honor, whereas capture resulted in abject disgrace").⁴⁴ It is also possible that the cultural and linguistic differences (or barriers) between the Japanese and Americans as opposed to the Germans and Americans were more extreme, creating more opportunities for perceived offenses on either side in the Japanese-run POW camps.

The influence of dramatically different cultural and linguistic norms may also help explain Vietnamese treatment of American POWs, which was similarly traumatic, but where

³⁸ Jefferson, *Red Tail Captured, Red Tail Free*.

³⁹ Herbert Zincke, with Scott A. Mills. *Mitsui Madhouse: Memoir of a U.S. Army Air Corps POW in World War II* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2003).

⁴⁰ Chester M. Biggs, Jr., *Behind the Barbed Wire: Memoir of a World War II US Marine Captured in North China in 1941 and Imprisoned by the Japanese Until 1945* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 1995).

⁴¹ James N. Rowe, *Five Years to Freedom: The True Story of a Vietnam POW* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1971).

⁴² Jacob Neufeld and George M. Watson, Jr. "A Brief Survey of POWs in Twentieth Century Wars," *Air Power History* (Summer 2013): 39.

⁴³ Ibid. The report cited was identified as a 1945 "Investigations of the National War Effort Report," no. 79-728)

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Bushido was absent as a norm. The perception that Americans were interfering in a Vietnamese affair is also a factor to consider. Neufeld and Watson, both American-based researchers, referred to the North Vietnamese as “The Communists” (rather than North Vietnamese) when referencing abusive treatment of the American POWs in their survey. Their label of “Communist” reflects the potentially mistaken [American] assumption that the Vietnam War (and its accompanying atrocities) was reflective of the Cold War, rather than a civil war. Undoubtedly elements of hegemonic tension existed between the “Communist” insurgency and the US-backed South-Vietnamese regime, but CIA analysts also noted that the Vietnamese insurgents were “predominantly nationalists rather than Communists.”⁴⁵ American public opposition to US involvement was clearly vocal, but the perspective of the people of North Vietnam also had to be considered.

Elisabeth Rosen obtained perspectives from the then-North Vietnamese veterans and civilians, forty years after the war, which may also provide insight into the dynamics reported at the POW camps by the American memoir writers. Vu Van Vinh, who was drafted into the North Vietnamese Army but discharged due to hearing problems, told Rosen, “People didn’t talk about the meaning of the war... We were really confused why the Americans tried to invade our homeland. We hadn’t done anything to them. People didn’t even know what communism was. They just knew what was going on with their lives.”⁴⁶ Others confirmed with Rosen that the Vietnam War was seen as a civil war between the North and South of Vietnam, and America only took part to support the South to fight communism. It was a fight to reunify the country, and

⁴⁵ Intelligence Memorandum No. 271: “Initial Alignments in the Event of War Before 1954,” 24 March 1950. (Initially Secret, declassified 4 January 1978), accessed Mar 31, 2017, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/cia-rdp78-01617a000900020003-7>.

⁴⁶ Elisabeth Rosen, “The Vietnam War, as Seen by the Victors,” *The Atlantic*, April 15, 2015, accessed Jan. 26, 2017, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/04/the-vietnam-war-as-seen-by-the-north-vietnamese/390627/>.

the North Vietnamese wanted to see the country united again.⁴⁷ American interference was seen as serving imperialist interests, not helping Vietnam become a unified country.

World War II: Germany and Japan POW Camps

As indicated earlier, Germany did sign and uphold the Geneva Convention provisions. Japan, while signing the same Convention, did not ratify the treaty, nor did they observe it in practice.⁴⁸ As will be reflected in the POW memoirs written during this time, there were some stark contrasts in the treatment of American prisoners between German and Japanese-run locations.

Arieh Kochavi noted three kinds of main camps run by the Germans. The *Stalag* was a permanent central army camp for noncommissioned officers (NCOs) or enlisted. Prisoners in *Stalag* were sentenced to the guardhouse for the slightest infraction of regulations. *Oflag* was a permanent central camp for officers, and *Stalag Luf* was a central camp for air force prisoners.⁴⁹ Both American POW memoir writers in the German camp were airmen, although Sirianni was enlisted and Jefferson was an officer. *Stalag Luf* was spelled as “*Stalag Luft*” in the memoirs. Both were in *Stalag Luft* camps, but Sirianni was in *Stalag Luft I* and Jefferson was in *Stalag Luft III*. Towards the end of his imprisonment, Jefferson was eventually moved to a *Stalag* camp (*Stalag VII*), providing some insight into the difference between how the different ranked service members experienced different conditions. Kochavi also describes *Dulag Luft*, a detention center through which all Air Force personnel (British and American) captured in German-occupied Europe passed through. The spellings might be slightly different between Kochavi and Sirianni,

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Neufeld and Watson, Jr., “A Brief Survey of POWs in Twentieth Century Wars,” 39.

⁴⁹ Arieh J. Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity: Britain and the United States and Their POWs in Nazi Germany* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005): 10-11.

but they appear to be referring to the same facilities. It had three main components – the interrogation center, the transit camp, and the hospital. Interrogators, per Kochavi’s research, generally spoke excellent English and used friendly persuasion (rather than physical violence) to achieve results – each interrogator received a daily supply of 20 cigarettes to deal out for that purpose.⁵⁰

Richard A. Radford, an economist and former POW at a German camp during World War II, noted the spontaneous emergence of economic activity in his POW camp,⁵¹ which was evident across other POW camps in the same period. Four of the five World War II period memoirs analyzed in this study corroborated Radford’s description of economic activity (in German- and Japanese-run camps), although they varied in moral valence (e.g., black markets, opportunism, or simple trade) and in how currency status emerged (e.g., cigarettes did not always carry currency status).

As noted, compared with the 1% death rate of American POWs in the German-run camps, the death rate at the Japanese-run POW camps was much higher (40%). Conditions at the Japanese-run camps were more severe and the language barrier much more pronounced. Men were bayoneted, tortured, and murdered,⁵² and the Bataan Death March (1942) resulted in the death of approximately 650 Americans during the March alone, while the additional 4,000 – 10,000 Americans who survived the March were imprisoned.⁵³ Experimentation on American

⁵⁰ Ibid, 73.

⁵¹ R.A. Radford, “The Economic Organization of a POW Camp,” *Economica* (Nov. 1945).

⁵² Harry Spiller, *American POWs in World War II: Twelve Personal Accounts of Captivity by Germany and Japan* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009): 2.

⁵³ Kevin Murphy, “‘To Sympathize and Exploit’” Filipinos, Americans, and the Bataan Death March,” *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 19:3/4 (2011): 296.

POWs in Japan included dissecting eight American airmen while they were still alive at the anatomy department of Kyushu University.⁵⁴

Vietnam: POW Camps

The average length of internment was just over two years.⁵⁵ All three memoir writers from the Vietnam War were prisoners of war for over five years, well over twice that average. In addition to conditions of filth and disease, extended periods of starvation and solitary confinement, many POWs in Vietnam were subjected to brutal methods of torture, including but not limited to “rope torture,”⁵⁶ which often resulted in torn and/or dislocated shoulders; indoctrination using loudspeaker barrages broadcast at “ear-splitting amplification”⁵⁷ with no way to control the volume or program selection; being bound hand and foot “in a twisted bent-over position that prevented sleep and caused excruciating pain”; and the use of stocks that caused both severe pain and constriction of organs and blood vessels.⁵⁸ Accurate POW and Missing in Action (MIA) data were difficult to authenticate, but of the 766 Americans known to have been POWs, 114 died in captivity (14.9%).⁵⁹

Rochester and Kiley (1998) noted that the distinction between “interrogation” and “indoctrination” was blurred by the Vietnamese, even though by definition the first referred to extraction of information and the second to imparting information. In practice, they reported, the

⁵⁴ Thomas Easton, “A quiet honesty records a World War II atrocity,” *The Baltimore Sun*, May 28, 1995, accessed Jan. 28, 2017, http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1995-05-28/news/1995148003_1_japan-kyushu-university-fukuoka.

⁵⁵ William Paul Skelton III, “American Ex-Prisoners of War,” Independent Study Course released April 2002, accessed Jan. 28, 2017, <http://www.publichealth.va.gov/docs/vhi/pow.pdf>.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 145 – 146.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 181.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 299.

⁵⁹ “Statistical information about the casualties of the Vietnam War,” National Archives website, last updated February 28, 2017, accessed Mar. 10, 2017, <https://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics.html>.

two methods became “flip sides of the same seamless process, closely intertwined and conducted usually by the same personnel.”⁶⁰ The incessant drilling (including the loudspeaker barrages) was focused on gaining propaganda and disorienting the prisoners, focusing more on the sovereignty of the Vietnamese people than on Communist ideology.

The prison speaker systems broadcast up to five hours of programming daily, including not a program on the history of Vietnam, but “taped appeals from prominent American peace advocates...such as Jane Fonda, Joan Baez, Stokely Carmichael, and Ramsey Clark.”⁶¹

Apparently Jane Fonda’s allegations of cowardice on the part of American pilots, like the claims of bombing at night, killing women and children, so enraged Fred Cherry (an American pilot) that he tried to “tear his irons from the walls.”⁶² Both Nick Rowe and John McCain recalled the programs in interviews for Rochester and Kiley’s book; McCain said that they would tell them when Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were shot, but “they never bothered to tell us about the moon shot.”⁶³ Rowe noted that “the most devastating” blows to prisoners’ morale were quotes by [antiwar] senators Mansfield, Fulbright, and McGovern. Other news broadcasted as noted by Rowe included “the anti-war movement in the US, the racial problems, the campus disorders, the draft card burners, the deserters, and the self-immolations.”⁶⁴

Common behaviors found across camps and time periods

In addition to the conditions faced by American POWs during both war periods, some common behaviors appeared to occur across camps and time periods. For example, finding a way

⁶⁰ Stuart I. Rochester, and Frederick Kiley, *Honor Bound: The History of American Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia, 1961 – 1973* (Washington, DC: Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 1998): 169.

⁶¹ Ibid, 180 – 181.

⁶² Ibid, 181.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

to communicate via code and giving nicknames to captors, fellow POWs, locations, and other items in their environment within the prison camps occurred in World War II and during the Vietnam War. Also emerging across time periods and locations was the development of creative activities, like poetry, artwork/cartoons, and even music. These behaviors are briefly discussed here because they were frequently cited in the POW memoirs analyzed for this study, and the reader could benefit from an introduction to these behaviors for better context.

Many former POWs across time periods recall the development of some form of secret code to communicate between fellow prisoners and in letters to family/friends beyond their walls. John Pryor, a British POW imprisoned in Germany during World War II, wrote coded letters to his family to provide intelligence back home about how to prevent submarine attacks and where certain German weapons dumps for British bombers were located.⁶⁵ Tap codes were developed and used among American POWs during the Vietnam War as a medium for information exchange and for conversation.⁶⁶ In a way, joining the network of POWs who knew the tap code opened a way to join a social structure to be included. Commander James Mulligan learned the tap code from a Marine, but at first did not understand. Rochester and Kiley note his moment of discovery:⁶⁷

I stayed awake most of the night engaged in arduous practice as I firmly implanted the new code in my mind. I wanted to be able to communicate with [Frederick] the first thing in the morning. God was I lonesome for human companionship...I only needed to master the POW code, and I would have the ability to join the social structure again.

Nicknames were given to captors, fellow POWs, places, and sometimes significant events by American POWs in both World War II and the Vietnam War. Interrogators and other individuals

⁶⁵ Meredith Bennet-Smith, "World War II Code Used By British POW In Letters Home Cracked, Offering Rare Glimpse At MI9 History," *The World Post*, May 2, 2013, accessed Feb. 16, 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/01/world-war-ii-pow-code-cracked-mi9_n_3196301.html.

⁶⁶ Rochester and Kiley, *Honor Bound: The History of American Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia, 1961 – 1973*, 103.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 104.

at camps were nicknamed according to some attribute that made them stand out. For example, Chester Biggs recalled an interrogator at Woosung POW camp (World War II) that earned the name of Beast, because he was so dominating and would scream and shout while stomping up and down.⁶⁸ John McCain spoke of a man called “The Cat,” who was in charge of the POW camps in Hanoi (Vietnam War) and whom McCain described as “a rather dapper sort, one of the petty intelligentsia that run North Vietnam.”⁶⁹ Richard Gordon recalled a Navy corpsman nicknamed “Queenie,” because he developed homosexual appetites once he was better fed, confirming a trend that appeared in the camp shortly before his departure from Cabanatuan Prison Camp (World War II). He noted, “When the stomach is empty, food is of paramount importance. But once the stomach no longer craves food, a sexual appetite reappears in the young male... a number of Queenies had surfaced in Cabanatuan.”⁷⁰ The camps themselves also received nicknames, like “Mitsui Madhouse,”⁷¹ “Hanoi Hilton,” Dessert Inn,⁷² “Heartbreak Hotel,”⁷³ and the “Salt Mines”.⁷⁴

Artistic creativity in these camps also emerged across time and place. Sears Eldredge described the music and theater event at Chungkai, the POW hospital camp in Thailand (World War II), known as “Wonder Bar”: “for an hour and a half the show not only allowed POWs to forget past and present horrors, but with its music, laughter and ‘beautiful girls,’ it reawakened memories of the home that was awaiting their return.”⁷⁵ Cartoons drawn by POWs were

⁶⁸ Biggs, Jr., *Behind the Barbed Wire: Memoir of a World War II US Marine Captured in North China in 1941 and Imprisoned by the Japanese Until 1945*, 114 – 116.

⁶⁹ McCain, “John McCain, Prisoner of War: A First-Person Account.”

⁷⁰ Richard M. Gordon, *Horyo: Memoirs of an American POW* (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1999): 128.

⁷¹ Zinke, *Mitsui Madhouse: Memoir of a US Army Air Corps POW in World War II*.

⁷² McCain, “John McCain, Prisoner of War: A First-Person Account.”

⁷³ Leo Thorsness, *Surviving Hell: A POW's Journey* (New York: Encounter Books, 2008): 27.

⁷⁴ Rowe, *Five Years to Freedom: the True Story of a Vietnam POW*, 179.

⁷⁵ Sears Eldredge, “Wonder Bar: Music and Theatre as Strategies for Survival in a Second World War POW Hospital Camp,” in *Cultural Heritage and Prisoners of War: Creativity Behind Barbed Wire*, eds. Gilly Carr and Harold Mytum (New York: Routledge, 2012): 19.

recovered from World War II; one of the memoir writers (Alexander Jefferson) in this study also drew cartoons, which portrayed life in the Stalag camps in a way that words could not. Anna Wickiewicz noted that iconographical sources produced by POWs contained information about the emotions and intentions of their creators that was impossible to convey by narration.⁷⁶ Another memoir writer in this study, Nick Rowe, wrote poetry. Even songs were composed. Chester Biggs recalls how a song was composed called “*Yamasay*,” meaning “rest” in Japanese, which recounted the trials and tribulations of building Mt. Fuji in 1944.⁷⁷

The Memoir Writers: Biographical Sketches

The purpose of this section is to provide biographical context for each of the memoir writers, with special attention to their historical and military contexts, the timing of their capture, length of captivity, release or escape, years in active duty, significant relationships, cause of death (if deceased), and timing of the memoir. Information was drawn using publicly available biographical information, obituaries, and data from the memoirs. Each biographical sketch will follow approximately the same sequence. The first part will cover the memoir writer’s life in broad strokes. The second part will more deeply discuss each memoirist’s relevant military training and career, age at capture, age at release, and tenure in the military. Information pertaining to this second section will be gleaned from both the memoir writer’s self-disclosure in the written work and publicly available information. The last part will discuss the structure of his memoir and his narrative style. Although the memoir structure and narrative style are more

⁷⁶ Anna Wickiewicz, “In the Distorted Mirror: Cartoons and Photography of Polish and British POWs in Wehrmacht Captivity,” in *Cultural Heritage and Prisoners of War: Creativity Behind Barbed Wire*, eds. Gilly Carr and Harold Mytum (New York: Routledge, 2012): 105.

⁷⁷ Biggs, Jr., *Behind the Barbed Wire: Memoir of a World War II US Marine Captured in North China in 1941 and Imprisoned by the Japanese until 1945*, 152 – 153.

deeply explored in the analysis section, the brief descriptions of each author's style are designed to contextualize the narrator's voice. The three parts vary in size and depth by memoir writer, depending on such factors as military tenure and potential complexity of the narrative.

World War II: POWs in Germany

The two memoir writers of their POW experience in Germany were American airmen, one a Tuskegee Airman from Detroit, Michigan, and the other an aerial gunner from Winthrop, Massachusetts. Born only two years apart, the two airmen lived in very different social milieus before the war. Sirianni was a white male from the New England region attending high school before reporting for duty. Jefferson was a black male from the Midwest, living in a segregated world that skewed against blacks, and yet he went to college and graduated with a double major in chemistry and biology, minoring in mathematics and physics. He was in graduate school at Howard University when he was activated for duty.

The two service members' ranks also influenced their POW camp locations. Sirianni, a sergeant at the time of capture, went to *Stalag Luft I* after being detained at *Dulag Luft*. Jefferson, a lieutenant, went to *Stalag Luft III* for five months before being relocated to *Stalag VIIA* for nearly three months prior to liberation. The conditions at *Stalag Luft I* and *Stalag Luft III/VIIA* shaped very different experiences for the two men, which will be compared in the analysis section of the study.

Ralph E. Sirianni, Jr. (b. 1923, d. 2010)

Ralph E. Sirianni, Jr., was born on December 24, 1923 and died on May 31, 2010.⁷⁸ Drafted at the age of 19 in 1943, he left high school to report for induction.⁷⁹ He would later earn his diploma from Winthrop High School in 1960.⁸⁰ He married Mary Moriarity on September 15, 1946 and had a daughter, Kristine.⁸¹ Sirianni's civilian career was extensive, including serving as a police officer after his honorable discharge in 1945, Winthrop Board of Health inspector until the 1960s, and as Democratic state representative from Winthrop for five terms from 1965 – 1974. He died at the age of 86 from lung cancer.⁸²

Sirianni's tenure in the military of just under three years is the shortest of all the memoir writers. Drafted in January of 1943, he went through basic training in February, followed by gunnery school. He was sent for further training at the Army Air Force Technical School at Sheppard Field in Wichita Falls, Texas.⁸³ About a year after boot camp, he received orders to move overseas. His bomb group missions began in March of 1944.⁸⁴ He was shot down on his seventh mission, two weeks after his first mission. Only 20 years old at the time of capture, he would spend a little over one year in captivity before the camp was liberated by Russian Cossacks. Later that year he was honorably discharged from military service.⁸⁵

⁷⁸ "Ralph Sirianni," obituary found on www.tributes.com, accessed Jan. 20, 2017.

⁷⁹ Ralph E. Sirianni with Patricia I. Brown. *POW #3959: Memoir of a World War II Airman Shot Down over Germany* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2006): 5.

⁸⁰ Shana Wickett, "Ralph E. Sirianni, Jr. at 86; former state representative," *The Boston Globe website*, June 28, 2010, accessed Jan. 20, 2017, http://archive.boston.com/bostonglobe/obituaries/articles/2010/06/28/ralph_e_sirianni_jr_at_86_former_state_representative/.

⁸¹ Sirianni, *POW #3959: Memoir of a World War II Airman Shot Down over Germany*, 151 - 156.

⁸² Wickett, Shana, "Ralph E. Sirianni, Jr. at 86; former state representative."

⁸³ Sirianni, *POW #3959: Memoir of a World War II Airman Shot Down over Germany*, 7-14.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 30; 43.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 66, 128, 150.

Sirianni's memoir was published in 2005 with Patricia I. Brown, placing him in his eighties at the time of publication. Reflecting on his experience as an enlisted service member captured in Germany, it also covers a wide range of contextual detail, from pre-enlistment (high school) years to capture/POW experience, followed by two post-release reflections and visitations 40 – 43 years later. The twelve chapter book devotes a full five chapters to his capture and POW experience (Ch. 5 – 9). Three chapters cover his training and pre-capture missions (Ch. 2 – 4). Two chapters reflect on his trips back to the POW camp and his crash site (Ch. 11 – 12), and one chapter each are devoted to his pre-enlistment years (Ch.1) and his homecoming after being liberated (Ch. 10). Within his POW experience narrative, one chapter recalls his capture, one discusses *Dulag Luft* Interrogation Center (where he was processed), and the remaining three reflect on his time at *Stalag Luft I* (beginning, middle, and end). Most notable about his memoir in regard to meaning-making is his repeated reflection on freedom as represented by the church, steeple, and arch that together became an enduring symbol of freedom for him.

Alexander Jefferson (b. 1921)

Alexander Jefferson was born on November 15, 1921 and remains alive at the time of this study. A native of Detroit, Jefferson is the only black American service member (and Tuskegee airman) included in this study. Unlike Sirianni, who left high school to report for duty, Jefferson had already graduated from Clark College with a double major in chemistry and biology and minors in mathematics and physics before joining the US Army Reserves in 1942.⁸⁶ He married Adella McDonald-Tucker on October 16, 1946. Shortly after discharge from active duty in 1947, Jefferson joined the Air Force Reserve and served for another 22 years.

⁸⁶ Jefferson, *Red Tail Captured, Red Tail Free*, xi.

Jefferson's military career spanned nearly 27 years, in two phases. The first phase was from September 1942 to January 1947 as a US Army Reservist, activated in April 1943 to begin flight training and eventually serve overseas. Shot down over southern France on August 12, 1944, he was captured at the age of 22 and spent his captivity in *Dulag Luft*, *Stalag Luft III*, and *Stalag VIIA* until April 29, 1945, or a total of eight months.⁸⁷ The second phase of his military service began in January of 1947 when he was discharged from active duty and joined the Air Force Reserve. While in the Reserves, Jefferson developed his civilian career as an educator, earning a MA in Education from Wayne State University and serving as both a teacher and as an administrator, which extended beyond his retirement from Air Force Reserve in 1969.⁸⁸ His decorations include, among others, a Purple Heart, Congressional Gold Medal, WWII Victory Medal, Air Medal, and Armed Forces Service Medal.⁸⁹

Jefferson mentioned in his memoir that it took over fifty years to write (1948 – 2005), beginning from the time he taught aviation at an elementary school, until he completed writing it with historian Lewis H. Carlson at the age of 83.⁹⁰ Like Sirianni, Jefferson's memoir covered his pre-enlistment years, enlistment, training, combat, capture/POW experience, release, and post-release reflections. His memoir is eight chapters long with a brief "Postscript" that reflects on his experience with the Tuskegee airmen. Three of the eight chapters are devoted to his capture and POW experience (Ch. 5 – 7), primarily at *Stalag Luft III*. Two chapters cover his formative years and pre-enlistment period (Ch. 1 – 2), and two cover his training and pre-capture missions (Ch. 3 – 4). One chapter is devoted to his life after being discharged in 1947. Jefferson provided insight

⁸⁷ Ibid, xii.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ "Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Jefferson, (ret.)," Organization of Black Aerospace Professionals, accessed Feb. 3, 2017, <http://www.obap.org/alexander-johnson>.

⁹⁰ Jefferson, *Red Tail Captured, Red Tail Free*, 3.

into his meaning-making process throughout the memoir, but an underlying theme for his account was his evolving sense of self over time (as African American and Tuskegee Airman).

In a 2015 interview published in the Academy of Model Aeronautics and Model Aviation Magazine, Jefferson reflected on his later years. In 1972 he started the first Tuskegee Airmen chapter in Detroit, which then triggered the emergence of other chapters around the country.⁹¹ He also started a museum to preserve the history of the Tuskegee Airmen. He continued to travel into the 2000s and has remain active in his community. Jefferson's resilience and energy remain evident all the way to the end of the interview (he was 93 years old at the time): "Life is beautiful. I've got news for you – all you got to do is become involved. Get up off your knees, and hustle!"⁹²

World War II: POWs in Japan/Japanese-run camps

The three memoir writers were from different services in the military. All three enlisted at the age of eighteen, and all three served at least twenty years in the service. Chester M. Biggs, Jr. was a Marine, Richard M. Gordon was in the Army, and Herbert Zincke started in Army Air Corps and later served in the Air Force. All three had civilian careers after retiring from the military and lived past the age of eighty years. All three memoir writers are deceased.

There were some differences in their capture experiences. Biggs was in North China when he was captured, and Gordon and Zincke were in the Philippines. Both Gordon and Biggs had served under two years when they were captured, but Zincke had been serving five years before he was captured. Their civilian career paths also varied: Biggs taught school and served in

⁹¹ "Full Interview Lt. Col. Jefferson," AMA Air, accessed Feb. 2, 2017, <http://air.modelaircraft.org/lt-col-alexander-jefferson/>.

⁹² Ibid.

the education environment, Gordon went on for further education in criminal justice and served in the public sector, and Zincke worked as a government contractor.

Chester M. Biggs, Jr. (b. 1921, d. 2011)

Chester M. Biggs, Jr. was born on October 15, 1921 and died on December 7, 2011.

Biggs enlisted with the US Marine Corps at the age of eighteen, serving for twenty years and retiring with the rank of master sergeant in 1959.⁹³ He was survived by his wife of 53 years (Betty May Biggs), one daughter, three sons, and twelve grandchildren.⁹⁴ Very little of his civilian life was publicly available, but the back matter of his memoir indicated that he taught school and served as a coordinator for audiovisual printing services at Southeastern Community College in Whiteville, NC.⁹⁵

Born and raised in rural Oklahoma, he joined the US Marine Corps after graduating from high school. When he finished recruit training in San Diego, he was assigned to Puget Sound shipyard for about three months before he was assigned to American Embassy guard duty in Peking, China.⁹⁶ He was on duty for eighteen months before World War II broke out. While serving in China, he was captured by the Japanese as a private first class at the age of twenty. He was imprisoned for nearly four years (45-46 months) in six POW camps located between North China and Japan.

⁹³ Biggs, Jr., *Behind the Barbed Wire: Memoir of a World War II US Marine Captured in North China in 1941 and Imprisoned by the Japanese until 1945*, 219.

⁹⁴ "Chester Maxwell Biggs, Jr.," McNeill Mackie Funeral Home, accessed Jan. 31, 2017, <http://www.mcneillmackiefuneralhome.com/obits/obituary.php?id=134008>.

⁹⁵ Biggs, Jr., *Behind the Barbed Wire: Memoir of a World War II US Marine Captured in North China in 1941 and Imprisoned by the Japanese until 1945*.

⁹⁶ "Interview with Chester M. Biggs, Jr.," Veterans History Project, July 12, 2011, accessed Feb. 2, 2017, <https://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.79335/mv0001001.stream>. Since Biggs' memoir did not provide contextual details regarding his pre-capture years, military career, or time after release, interview data from the Veterans History Project was accessed to provide more details here.

Although he served for a total of twenty years as a Marine, Biggs disclosed very little about his time in service in his memoir, other than that he “made the Corps a career.”⁹⁷ He mostly served guard duty after World War II, and when the Korean War broke out, he was stationed with the First Engineers Battalion, reinforcement First Division. As he recalled his service, he said that it was a “good life,” but prison camp was the most significant point in his career.⁹⁸ Biggs received numerous decorations and citations, including the WWII Victory Medal and China War Memorial Medal. He was also active in the SERE program at Camp McCall, sharing his experience as a North China Marine POW with those in training.⁹⁹ In his closing thoughts in his 2011 interview, he mentioned that he bore no hatred for the Japanese, saying that he had no animosity towards them. Despite everything, he felt he had a good life.¹⁰⁰

Biggs’ memoir was the most difficult to exegete because he provides very little elaboration on personal meaning. Furthermore, he often uses first person plural when attributing meaning to something significant (e.g., “we all came to hate him (Beast) with a passion,” “we never fully understood,” “we had resigned ourselves to the fact that we were prisoners of war and were likely to remain so”). Published in 1995, his memoir was released over fifty years after his capture in North China. The memoir focuses almost entirely on his time in captivity, with three of the eight chapters of the memoir providing contextual details of the period immediately preceding their capture. Very little context is provided about his pre-enlistment years, and his epilogue is a brief six sentences. Unlike the other memoir writers in this section, who were routed from the Philippines, Biggs’ experience traces a route from North China to Japan. Biggs

⁹⁷ Biggs, Jr., *Behind the Barbed Wire: Memoir of a World War II US Marine Captured in North China in 1941 and Imprisoned by the Japanese until 1945*, 210.

⁹⁸ “Interview with Chester M. Biggs, Jr.,” Veterans History Project, July 12, 2011.

⁹⁹ “Chester Maxwell Biggs, Jr. Obituary,” *Star News online*, Dec. 10, 2011, accessed Feb. 3, 2017, <http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/starnewsonline/obituary.aspx?n=chester-maxwell-biggs&pid=154964518>.

¹⁰⁰ “Interview with Chester M. Biggs, Jr.,” Veterans History Project.

makes clear that he does not dwell on the cruelty and inhumane treatment he witnessed or received, but that his intent in the memoir is to “tell something of how we lived, worked, and entertained ourselves.”¹⁰¹ The narrative also is focused on the rank and file experience rather than on those of the officers.

Richard M. Gordon (b. 1921, d. 2003)

Richard M. Gordon was born on November 10, 1921, in New York City, and raised in Hell’s Kitchen, where his family stayed until he was eighteen years old, when he decided to join the Army.¹⁰² He stated in a 2001 interview that he joined the army because he wanted to be a soldier, but also to escape his financial situation, which was dire.¹⁰³ Shortly after returning from World War II, he got married and started a family. He earned a degree in criminal justice from the University of Maryland and later joined the Long Island, New York police force.¹⁰⁴ His civilian career included serving as an investigator for the District Attorney of Suffolk County, New York; Assistant Director, Suffolk County Mental Health Board; Assistant Director, Drug Control Board; and Assistant Professor at St. Petersburg Junior College.¹⁰⁵ He passed away July 26, 2003,¹⁰⁶ just three and a half months shy of his 82nd birthday.

Gordon enlisted in the Army in 1940, and had served just under two years when he was captured at the age of twenty years old. He survived the Bataan Death March only to later be

¹⁰¹ Biggs, Jr., *Behind the Barbed Wire: Memoir of a World War II US Marine Captured in North China in 1941 and Imprisoned by the Japanese until 1945*, 1.

¹⁰² Gordon, *Horyo: Memoirs of an American POW*, 1-11.

¹⁰³ “Richard M. Gordon, Major, US Army, World War Two,” Interview on Jan. 31, 2001, New York State Military Museum, accessed Jan. 31, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XKf_C1QFOKo.

¹⁰⁴ “Richard Gordon,” Brooke County Public Library, accessed Feb. 3, 2017, http://philippine-defenders.lib.wv.us/html/gordon_richard_bio.html.

¹⁰⁵ Gordon, *Horyo: Memoirs of an American POW*.

¹⁰⁶ “Major Richard M. Gordon,” Philippine Scouts Heritage Society, accessed Feb. 3, 2017, <http://www.philippine-scouts.org/the-scouts/in-memoriam/obituary-major-richard-m-gordon.html>.

shipped on the infamous *Nagato Maru* to Japan, where he was imprisoned until the end of the war.¹⁰⁷ Even after his POW experience, Gordon remained active in the Army until 1960, serving in both Europe and Okinawa.¹⁰⁸ He retired with the rank of major.

Gordon's memoir was published in 1999, making him 78 years old at the time. Most striking about Gordon's account is his bitterness towards his fellow American POWs whose heartless actions he said he would remember until the day he died. Unlike Biggs, Gordon provides considerable context about his pre-enlistment and pre-capture periods. The middle 11 of 23 chapters are devoted to his time in captivity. The first nine chapters provide a prelude of context, with one chapter covering his pre-enlistment years and one third of the nine deconstructing the fall of Bataan that led to his capture. About 25% of the memoir is devoted to his experiences prior to the war. About half of the memoir covers his captivity (from Bataan to the ship *Nagato Maru* which transported him and his fellow prisoners to Japan, and his labor as a POW in Mitsushima, Japan), and four chapters cover the end of the war, his release, and his return home. While he provided extensive pre-capture context, his epilogue is only three pages long, leaving little space for post-freedom reflection in this work.

Herbert Zincke (b. 1919, d. 2010)

Herbert Zincke was born on February 24, 1919, in New York City. Like the other Japanese POW memoir writers, he too enlisted at the age of eighteen as a member of the Army Air Corps. After the war he tested for and passed for rank of warrant officer, serving domestically and abroad. His first marriage ended in divorce, and his second marriage to

¹⁰⁷ Gordon, *Horyo: Memoirs of an American POW*.

¹⁰⁸ "Major Richard M. Gordon," Philippine Scouts Heritage Society.

Maudenya Burns lasted for 41 years until her death in 1997. His civilian career included contract work for the government. He died of pneumonia on December 11, 2010, at the age of 91.¹⁰⁹

He had served five years before he was captured in May 1942 and held for over three years.¹¹⁰ Like Gordon, Zincke survived the Bataan Death March and was transported by ship (*Tottori Maru*) to Japan,¹¹¹ where he spent the rest of his imprisonment. Zincke served for a total of 23 years in the military (first Air Corps, then the Air Force) before retiring in 1960, working as a warrant officer in Japan during the Korean War, and later as an Armaments and Electronics Officer in Louisiana. His last post before retiring was at Langley Air Force Base in Virginia. In 1999 Zincke and a group of former POWs filed a class-action lawsuit against several large Japanese companies, claiming they profited from their prisoners' forced labor during the war.¹¹² Zincke is a Bronze Star recipient.¹¹³

Zincke's memoir was published in 2003, over sixty years after his capture. He was 84 years old at the time of publication. The 19-chapter book offers a one-paragraph synopsis of his pre-enlistment years and a very brief epilogue at the end. The first five chapters provide details of his enlisted pre-capture period, and thirteen chapters describe his captive period, from the Philippines to Japan. The last chapter captures his transition from POW status to release. Zincke devoted almost 70% of his memoir to his POW experience. Zincke was the only memoirist of the World War II POWs that mentioned an extraordinary experience of God during his imprisonment. In contrast with Gordon, Zincke's narrative recalls extraordinarily positive

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Zincke, *Mitsui Madhouse: Memoir of a US Army Air Corps POW in World War II*.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 63.

¹¹² T. Rees Shapiro, "A local life: Herbert L. Zincke, 91, spent 41 months in captivity as WWII prisoner of war," The Washington Post, March 26, 2011, accessed Feb. 3, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/a-local-life-herbert-l-zincke-91-spent-40-months-in-captivity-as-wwii-prisoner-of-war/2011/03/24/AFfQNfB_story.html?utm_term=.7b5a7e6a58ca.

¹¹³ "Herbert Zincke," *The QUAN: The Descendants Group and the American Defenders of Bataan & Corregidor*, 68 (Summer 2012): 17.

experiences of connecting with fellow Americans shortly after his release and attaches positive meaning to them.

Zincke's activism and research into the POW camps of Japan led him to lecture at high schools to talk about his experiences. During the time he was working on *Mitsui Madhouse*, he says that what bothered him most is that teenagers he meets know nothing about Japan's abuse of war prisoners. He wanted the American people to "understand what happened."¹¹⁴ Some may take issue with his perspective or interpretation of these events. Although Zincke may have made some truth claims about what happened there, this study is less interested in the truth claims and more interested in how he established meaning with the extraordinary experiences he recounted, positive and negative, making connections within and beyond himself. To put it more plainly, this study is more interested in what his experiences meant to him rather than whether what he reported is completely and factually accurate. I mention this here because these lawsuits were a source of controversy in the public square and am positioning this study as one that is less interested in the controversy and more interested in the personal meaning-making of the memoirist, as is the case with all of the memoirists studied.

Vietnam War POWs

The three POW memoir writers of the Vietnam period were very different from each other in many ways. McCain was in the Navy, Thorsness was in the Air Force, and Rowe was in the Army (Special Forces). McCain was a third-generation Navy service member who graduated from the US Naval Academy, Thorsness was born and raised on a farm in Minnesota, and Rowe

¹¹⁴ Marego Athans, "Ex-POWs want pay, apology from Japanese," The Baltimore Sun, November 26, 1999, accessed Feb. 4, 2017, http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1999-11-26/news/9911260032_1_mitsui-prisoners-war-ii.

was raised in a small Texas town, the son of a Russian immigrant who survived the Bolshevik Revolution.¹¹⁵ Both McCain and Thorsness retired from the military and became public servants and both remain alive at the time of this study. Rowe retired briefly for seven years before being recalled to active duty, serving in the military until his assassination in 1989.

The memoirs are also very different from each other. McCain's memoir is the briefest at about 12,250 words, which was published as part of a story in *US News and World Report*. Thorsness' memoir is structured in a thematic as opposed to chronological order, with deeper reflections on the rhythms of his POW life. Rowe's memoir is by far the longest at approximately 186,000 words,¹¹⁶ with no table of contents and only ten numbered chapters. The authors provide varying levels of context around their pre-enlistment, pre-capture, capture, release or escape, and homecoming experiences and also have very different writing styles. McCain's memoir was published two months after his release, Thorsness' memoir more than thirty years after his release, and Rowe's memoir just under three years after his escape and rescue.

John S. McCain, III (b. 1936)

John McCain was born August 29, 1936, at the Coco Solo Naval Station in Panama, and remains alive at the time of this study. His father and grandfather were both 4-star admirals. McCain's first marriage to Carol Shepp ended in divorce, and he eventually remarried. After twenty-three years of military service, he went on to serve in the public sector, gaining entry to

¹¹⁵ Susan Keating, "Col. James 'Nick' Rowe," Military.com, accessed Feb. 4, 2017, http://www.military.com/Content/MoreContent?file=ML_rowe_keating.

¹¹⁶ This was approximated with the following calculation: I counted ~10 words/line, 40 lines per page, and 465 pages in the 1971 Ballantine Books edition (New York), paperback.

the world of politics. McCain has been in public office as a senator and representative from Arizona since 1982¹¹⁷ and remains active in politics.

A graduate of the United States Naval Academy, McCain stated that his time there instilled certain principles, a code of honor, dependence on one's comrades, and a reverence for and desire to emulate the leaders they talked about over those years, whether it was John Paul Jones or Teddy Roosevelt. He became a Navy pilot because "it was the most glamorous and exciting life that any person could ever choose, and my grandfather was a navy pilot."¹¹⁸ He was 31 years old at the time of capture in Vietnam, having served about nine years. After his release in 1973 from 5.5 years as a POW, he was rehabilitated and cleared to fly again, and in 1976 was given command of an air squadron based at Cecil Field in Jacksonville, Florida.¹¹⁹ He retired from the Navy as a captain in 1981. McCain's military decorations include the Silver Star, Legion of Merit, Purple Heart, and Distinguished Flying Cross.¹²⁰

McCain's POW memoir is not in book form, but was authored by him as part of a story that originally appeared in the May 14, 1973 issue of *US News and World Report*.¹²¹ It was published just two months after his release on March 14, 1973, the narrowest gap in time between release and publication of the memoirists considered here. It is also the briefest memoir, spanning a mere 12,500 words. Organized as a series of vignettes, it begins with the moments surrounding his capture after being shot down and concludes with a few lines of post-release reflection. The bulk of the memoir is a collection of stories that illustrate his captivity, with

¹¹⁷ "McCain, John Sidney III, (1936 -)," Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, accessed Feb. 4, 2017, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=M000303>.

¹¹⁸ "John S. McCain, III," The Library of Congress: American Memory, "Stories from the Veterans History Project," January 29, 2003, last updated October 26, 2011, accessed Feb. 4, 2017, <http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp-stories/loc.natlib.afc2001001.07736/>.

¹¹⁹ Scott Horsley, "McCain's First (And Only) Military Command," NPR, July 8, 2008, accessed Feb. 4, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=92308526>.

¹²⁰ "McCain," Biographical Directory of the United States Congress.

¹²¹ McCain, "John McCain, Prisoner of War: A First-Person Account."

subtitles like, “Communication Was Vital for Survival,” “They Told Me I’d Never Go Home,” “Prayer: I Was Sustained in Times of Trial,” and “How Dick Stratton Was ‘Really Wrung Out’”.¹²² Although McCain has written other memoirs since then, this early text was chosen for analysis because it was temporally closest to his POW experience. Although not extensively discussed in the study, there is a difference between how meaning was established in this work, so soon after the events, as compared with something like Thorsness’ memoir, who had much longer to internalize his experiences and situate them in a framework of meaning.

Leo K. Thorsness (b. 1932)

Leo K. Thorsness was born during the Depression on February 14, 1932, in Walnut Grove, MN.¹²³ He remains alive at the time of this study.¹²⁴ His family owned a farm and were poor, but “we never went hungry, and we never had to sell our land.”¹²⁵ He enlisted with the Air Force at the age of eighteen, meeting his future wife Gaylee Anderson in the registration line. They married three years later and had a daughter, who was 11 years old when he left for Vietnam in 1966.¹²⁶ Thorsness received his bachelor’s degree from the University of Omaha and his master’s degree from the University of Southern California.¹²⁷ He retired after 23 years of

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ “Leo Thorsness,” PBS – American Valor, accessed Feb. 4, 2017, <http://www.pbs.org/weta/americanvalor/stories/thorsness.html>.

¹²⁴ Update: Leo Thorsness passed away shortly after this study concluded, on May 2, 2017. Cause of death was leukemia, according to his wife, Gaylee. Source: Richard Goldstein, “Leo Thorsness, Decorated Veteran Held Captive with McCain, Dies at 85,” *The New York Times*, May 3, 2017, accessed July 30, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/03/us/obituary-leo-thorsness-dead-vietnam-medal-of-honor.html?mcubz=0>.

¹²⁵ Thorsness, *Surviving Hell: A POW’s Journey*, 15.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 17.

¹²⁷ “Leo Thorsness,” PBS – American Valor.

service,¹²⁸ working for six years as an executive with Litton Industries, and later serving as a state senator (Washington State).¹²⁹

Thorsness began training in 1953 to be an officer and pilot, and in 1954 received his commission as an officer, earning his wings and serving as a Strategic Air Command pilot. He had served the longest of all POW memoir writers studied in this study prior to his capture: seventeen years. He was 35 years old at the time. Due to the injuries he received from his ejection and subsequent torture, he was medically disqualified from further flying in the Air Force¹³⁰ and retired in 1973 with the rank of Colonel. He is a Medal of Honor recipient and carries numerous other decorations, including a Silver Star with Bronze Oak Leaf Cluster, Purple Heart with Bronze Oak Leaf Cluster, Distinguished Flying Cross with Silver Oak Leaf Cluster, Vietnam Service Medal, and Air Force Longevity Service Award.¹³¹

Thorsness' memoir is structured a little differently from the others in that it is organized thematically and not sequenced in chronological order. Many of his reflections return to his sense of home, family, and his faith. Published in 2008, more than three decades after his release, he also intersperses a variety of reflections in his 22-chapter book. The first two chapters recall two missions – his “Medal of Honor mission” and the mission in which he was shot down, two weeks later. The third chapter, “What I Brought With Me,” offered contextual details of his family life and pre-capture period. His chapters are named around the rhythm of life as a prisoner of war – for example, “Dinnertime,” “Walking Home,” “The Question of Freedom,” “Boredom,”

¹²⁸ “Leo Keith Thorsness,” Minnesota Medal of Honor Memorial, August 16, 2016, accessed Feb. 4, 2017, <http://minnesotamedalofhonormemorial.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Thorsness-Leo-Bio-August-16.pdf>.

¹²⁹ Thorsness, *Surviving Hell: A POW's Journey*, back cover.

¹³⁰ “Leo Keith Thorsness,” Minnesota Medal of Honor Memorial.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

and “Prison Talk” were more descriptive of a rhythm than the often sequenced titles of other memoirs in World War II.

James “Nick” Rowe (b. 1938, d. 1989)

James “Nick” Rowe was born on February 8, 1938, in McAllen, Texas. He was six years old when his older brother died soon after graduating from West Point, and he decided then to continue in his brother’s footsteps by applying and gaining acceptance to West Point.¹³² Much of Rowe’s adult life was spent as a service member, except for a brief period between 1974 – 1981 when he retired before being recalled to active duty. Those years were spent writing and in politics.¹³³ He was assassinated on April 21, 1989 at the age of 51, while working with the CIA to penetrate the New People’s Army (NPA) and its parent communist party.¹³⁴

Rowe graduated from West Point in 1960 and joined Special Forces in 1961 with the rank of Lieutenant. He had been serving only three years when he was captured in October of 1963, at the age of 25 years. Much of his captivity was spent in small jungle camps in South Vietnam, and he was kept in a cage of slender saplings, measuring 3 feet by 4 feet by 6 feet.¹³⁵ Sentenced for execution on the day of his rescue, Rowe was the only POW in this study to have escaped his captors and been successfully rescued. His escape was also only one of two successfully made by US Army personnel during the Vietnam War.¹³⁶ He was also the only one among the memoir writers who did not die of natural causes. Rowe’s military career included the formation of the Special Forces SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape) course, which

¹³² Keating, “Col. James ‘Nick’ Rowe.”

¹³³ “Colonel James “Nick” Rowe, Inducted 2 October 2008,” United States Army Special Operations Command, October 2, 2008, accessed Feb. 4, 2017, http://www.soc.mil/swcs/RegimentalHonors/pdf/sf_rowe.pdf.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Keating, “Col. James ‘Nick’ Rowe.”

¹³⁶ “Colonel James “Nick” Rowe, Inducted 2 October 2008,” United States Army Special Operations Command.

continues to be a requirement for graduation from the US Army Special Forces Qualification Course. He also worked closely with the CIA when he served as Chief, Ground Forces Division with JUSMAAG Philippines. Rowe's military awards and decorations include the Silver Star, Bronze Star with Oak Leaf Cluster, Purple Heart with Oak Leaf Cluster, Meritorious Service Medal, and Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry with Palm.¹³⁷

Rowe's 465-page memoir was published in 1971, just under three years after his rescue on December 31, 1968. He was 33 years old at the time his memoir was published. His memoir was filled with ruminations that provided intricate details about his meaning-making process. It does not have a table of contents, but has ten numbered chapters. The first two chapters provide detailed pre-capture context, and the last chapter describe his escape and return home. The remaining seven chapters depict his experience in captivity, including his multiple escape attempts.

Conclusion and Summary

This initial section was designed to help situate the reader, providing relevant historical and biographical context to the American POW experiences studied in this study. This is a qualitative study of a small selection of works. Historical context of the authors' time periods and war experiences will hopefully situate their memoirs in a broader perspective.

I went from broad to specific focus, beginning with a discussion of the war periods studied and American military culture and values. I also noted social conditions for black Americans during World War II and afterward, since one of the memoir writers studied in this

¹³⁷ Ibid.

period was a Tuskegee airman (Alexander Jefferson). Racism within the civilian and military realms caused perplexing complications in relationships between black service members and their military counterparts and in homecoming conditions after the wars.

In the section on the American POW experience in World War II, camp conditions were described first by war and then by region, including the variance in compliance to Geneva Conventions by their captors. Death rates of American POWs were higher in camps run by Japanese or Vietnamese (40% and 14.9%, respectively) than by the Germans (1%). Torture and brutality were also more frequently reported in the Japanese- and Vietnamese-run camps than in the German-run camps. Common behaviors were found across camps and time periods by researchers who interviewed and researched American POW experiences. Examples included finding a way to communicate via code and giving nicknames to captors, fellow POWs, locations, and other items in their environments. Also emerging across time periods and locations was the development of creative activities, like poetry, artwork/cartoons, and even music.

The third section narrowed the focus more specifically to the eight memoir writers studied, also grouped by time period and camp locations. For each war period I selected memoirists from the different branches (Army, Air Force/Army Air Corps, and Navy), except the Coast Guard, in which, as mentioned earlier, there were only four recorded Coast Guard POWs during World War II and no recorded POWs during the Vietnam War.¹³⁸ Special attention was given to their historical and military contexts, the timing of their capture, length of captivity, release or escape, years in active duty, significant relationships, cause of death (if deceased), and timing of the memoir. Information was drawn using publicly available biographical information,

¹³⁸ "Coast Guard History," United States Coast Guard website, last updated December 21, 2016, accessed Mar. 10, 2017, <https://www.uscg.mil/history/faqs/wars.asp>.

obituaries, and data from the memoirs. Each biographical sketch followed approximately the same sequence.

The tables below offer some overviews of the memoir writers. Table 1 provides basic information by war period, then by last name. Three of the eight memoir writers studied are alive at the time of this study, and the rest died of natural causes, except for James Rowe, who was assassinated.¹³⁹ Average age at capture of the WWII veterans studied was 21 years. The average age at capture of Vietnam War veterans was thirty years.

Table 1. Memoir Writers – Brief Overview

Last Name	YEAR of BIRTH	WAR/LOCATION	BRANCH	AGE (Capture)	AGE (Release)	YEAR OF DEATH	AGE AT DEATH	CAUSE OF DEATH
Biggs	1921	WWII - JAPAN	NAVY - USMC	20	23	2011	90	Natural causes
Gordon	1921	WWII - JAPAN	ARMY	20	24	2003	81	Natural causes
Zincke	1919	WWII - JAPAN	AIR FORCE - ARMY	23	26	2010	91	Pneumonia
Jefferson	1921	WWII - GERMANY	AIR FORCE - TUSKEGEE	23	24	N/A		
Sirianni	1923	WWII - GERMANY	AIR FORCE - ARMY	20	21	2010	86	Cancer
McCain	1936	VIETNAM	NAVY - AVIATOR	31	36	N/A		
Rowe	1938	VIETNAM	ARMY - GREEN BERET	25	30	1989	51	Assassination
Thorsness	1932	VIETNAM	AIR FORCE	35	41	N/A		

Table 2 provides additional details about their military service and the timing of their memoirs, which is sorted by time elapsed since POW release, from shortest (0 years, McCain) to longest (62 years, Sirianni). Those with the most years in training prior to capture were McCain and Thorsness, during the Vietnam War. During World War II, the average number of years in service for the memoir writers prior to capture was 2.1 years, with Sirianni having served the least amount of time (less than a year) prior to capture and Zincke having served the longest (five years).

¹³⁹ "Colonel James "Nick" Rowe, Inducted 2 October 2008," United States Army Special Operations Command.

Table 2. Memoirs by Time Elapsed Since POW Release

Last Name	WAR/LOCATION	AGE at Enlistment	YRS in service pre-capture	AGE (Capture)	AGE (Release)	TIME ELAPSED (YEARS)
McCain	VIETNAM	21	10	31	36	0
Rowe	VIETNAM	22	3	25	30	3
Thorsness	VIETNAM	18	17	35	41	35
Biggs	WWII - JAPAN	18	1.5	20	23	51
Gordon	WWII - JAPAN	18	2	20	24	54
Zincke	WWII - JAPAN	18	5	23	26	58
Jefferson	WWII - GERMANY	20	2	23	24	60
Sirianni	WWII - GERMANY	19	0	20	21	62

Part II: Concepts

The purpose of this section is to introduce concepts relevant to my study of transcendence in resilient American POW experiences. It is divided into four parts. The first part will introduce transcendence as a native, or fundamental, dimension of the human experience. It will also treat the concepts of experience and meaning-making, the narrative self, and time and space as a canvas for transcendence. The second part will briefly discuss resilience, explaining its salience in military psychology as well as my reasons for choosing to study service members with known resilience, two of which are highlighted here. First, the scarcity of narrative analysis of the memoirs of veterans with known resilience from a particularly traumatic experience, like a POW experience demands a serious attempt at producing such a study. Second, anti-transcendence, part of the paradox of the POW experience, receives virtually no attention in the literature, calling for conceptual innovation and a deeper study of its qualities. The third part will introduce my model of transcendence and anti-transcendence, and the last part will conclude with some final thoughts on transcendence at both the individual and collective levels.

Transcendence

Tracking transcendence as a native human process of meaning-making (rather than as an event or state of being) makes it more accessible to analysis and leaves room for comparative approaches (as between memoirists, for example), while at the same time acknowledging the subjective uniqueness of the individual's experiences. This section will introduce the idea of transcendence as a native feature of human experience, describe meaning-making as it would occur in transcendence, and the implications for anti-transcendence as anti-process. It also proposes two kinds of "outputs" from this process. Since this study is using a form of narrative

analysis to track the process, it will also discuss the narrative self and its connection with tracking outputs of transcendence.

A native feature of human experience

The idea that human beings have a predisposition towards transcendence, whether in a spiritual, religious, or other sense, has been recognized in multiple domains, including the scientific (especially neuropsychology) and social science fields, like religious studies and sociology. Although transcendence is defined in a variety of ways, the notion of a universal or near-universal human capacity to “rise above or go beyond the limits of,” or “overcome” something about one’s current situation, remains at the core of these formulations.

This section will introduce transcendence as a concept native to the human experience, beginning with a general definition of the word, followed by Wilfred Smith’s proposition of the general awareness and acceptance of the human predisposition towards transcendence. I will then introduce my concepts of transcendence and “anti-transcendence,” again moving from general definitions of transcendence and process to more specific explanations of transcendence as process and “anti-transcendence” as “anti-process.” I will refer to exemplary neuropsychological and religious studies that support the proposition that transcendence is native to the human experience, and conclude the section with a study that occupies the intersection between neuroscience and religion. The concluding example is meant to highlight how different fields are beginning to converge on the study of transcendence, acknowledging the need to cross disciplinary barriers to gain deeper insight into its components. This study takes an interdisciplinary approach to conceptualizing and tracking transcendence because no single field has the tools to do what I propose.

A Merriam-Webster definition of the verb “transcend” is: “a) to rise above or go beyond the limits of; b) to triumph over the negative or restrictive aspects of: to overcome.”¹ The noted scholar of religion Wilfred Cantwell-Smith (1990) posited that there has been “throughout history and across the world a general human awareness of transcendence; and a general human propensity to perceive and to express and to nurture the awareness of it, in and through specific forms.”² He states that the notion of “going” is integral to the concept, as is the “dynamic, the above-and-beyond implication” of the term.³ Transcendence is an expression of movement, suggesting a shift from one place to another. Smith’s treatment of transcendence is consistent with how the term is generally defined, and while he resisted giving a specific definition of it, he did identify aspects of transcendence that support the universality of the concept in the human experience. Smith describes transcendence in terms of a process of personal movement:⁴

This matter of movement is crucial; as is the point that it is human beings that move. Central to an understanding of the universe, of humanity, and of transcendence itself as a principle, is that the three are interrelated, intimately — and dynamically. Characteristic of transcendence is its process quality, and its involvement of us in its process. Characteristic of the universe is that it keeps transcending us — us and our grasp, though not entirely. Characteristic of us is that we are self-transcending, especially as we move through time, and that our awareness of the universe, of reality, of truth, though always partial, can, if we take proper steps, be less partial today than it was yesterday, less partial tomorrow than it is today.

Smith uses transcendence as a global principle, and refers to human beings as “self-transcending,” that is, we must move beyond ourselves in order to improve our awareness of the universe, of reality, and of truth. We find that other scholars also use the term “self-transcendence” to reflect something like what Smith describes.

¹ “Transcend,” Merriam-Webster dictionary website, accessed Mar. 4, 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/transcend>.

² Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “Thoughts on Transcendence,” *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 42:1 (1990): 32.

³ *Ibid*, 33.

⁴ *Ibid*, 36.

Like Smith, I agree that transcendence is a relevant and meaningful process that is part of human nature. However, perhaps with a narrower focus than Smith's characterization of human beings as "self-transcending," or increasing awareness of the universe, reality, or truth, I define transcendence as an experiential meaning-making process that helps form extraordinary connections both *within* and *beyond* the self with others, in time and space. The term "self-transcendence" becomes somewhat redundant in the context of my study, since forming "extraordinary connections within and beyond the self" are outcomes of transcendence as I define it. Therefore, I will not use the term "self-transcendence" in my analysis of the memoirs. I further define anti-transcendence as an "anti-process," resulting in by-products that are antonymous to transcendence. "Anti-process," as I have coined it here, can be better understood if we first look at how "process" is defined. A Merriam-Webster definition of "process" is: "a) a natural phenomenon marked by gradual changes that lead toward a particular result; b) a series of actions or operations conducing to an end."⁵ An "anti-process" can be defined as an *unnatural* phenomenon marked by *sharp, discontinuous* changes that prevent or block a particular result. The second part of the definition, when taken in the context of transcendence, considers the person's role in the process of assigning meaning to extraordinary, personally relevant events. In anti-transcendence, the person's role in assigning meaning is either disrupted or otherwise incapacitated.

Where transcendence is a meaning-making process, anti-transcendence, as an anti-process, prevents meaning-making from occurring, and may in fact catalyze *anomy*, which would represent a collapse of one's socially constructed world into meaninglessness.⁶ Examples

⁵ "Process," Merriam-Webster dictionary website, accessed Mar. 17, 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/process>.

⁶ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967): 23.

can be found in Elaine Scarry's work on pain and torture, some of which is discussed later. Insofar as transcendence can result in extraordinary connections within and beyond the self, the by-products of anti-transcendence are the opposite: disintegration or fracturing of connections within and beyond the self. Anti-transcendence is a necessary conceptualization because both transcendent and anti-transcendent events are found in the human condition. Although failure to make meaning of personally relevant transcendent events does not necessarily carry negative consequences, failure to make meaning of personally relevant *anti-transcendent* events does carry a downside risk of destabilizing one's sense of self and fracturing or disintegrating connections within and beyond oneself. Anti-transcendence as a possible precursor to destabilization of one's sense of self, fracturing or severing of deep ties within and beyond the self, and as a possible catalyst to something like anomie, has received virtually no attention in the literature. Studies have examined the by-products of anti-transcendence, like meaninglessness, but almost none have connected them to the notion that they are related to an anti-process that inhibits transcendence. One notable exception is found in Glenn Hughes' (2014) analysis of Emily Dickinson's poetry, in which he notes that Dickinson's spiritual fidelity to the mystery of divine transcendence is so strong that even the terror of life's meaninglessness does not register a "falling away of confidence in the truth of transcendence."⁷ I propose that anti-transcendence must be studied alongside transcendence in order to gain a more holistic understanding of transcendence as a native human construct.

Returning to studies of transcendence that support the idea that it is a native feature of the human experience, in the area of neuropsychology, Cosimo Urgesi et al (2010) defined "self-transcendence" as being composed of three subscales, namely, creative self-forgetfulness,

⁷ Glenn Hughes, "Love, Terror, and Transcendence in Emily Dickinson's Poetry," *Renascence* 66:4 (Fall 2014): 296 - 299.

transpersonal identification, and spiritual acceptance. They looked at pre- and post-neurosurgery personality assessment results using advanced brain-lesion mapping techniques to show that left and right parietal regions of the brain play a role in self-transcendence expression.⁸ Their results suggest the existence of a neurobiological component of self-transcendence that can be mapped to these areas of the brain.

While “self-forgetfulness” was a dimension of self-transcendence in Urgesi et al’s study, “selflessness” is defined as a foundation of spiritual transcendence in Johnston et al (2016). In their study, “transcendence” is defined in terms of “spiritual experience.”⁹ The authors define spiritual transcendence as a “sense of enhanced cosmic unity or a sense of increased emotional connection with higher powers beyond the self, with higher power defined according to an individual's specific worldview.”¹⁰ Using this definition, they cited psychology studies that suggest that spiritual transcendence is a relatively “distinct and quantifiable unitary construct that has been empirically validated in psychometric studies,”¹¹ also citing genetic studies that further support this finding. In their study of faith traditions, “selflessness” was often promoted as “an exemplary human trait, as a behavior necessary for achieving salvation or enlightenment.”¹² Despite the different historical and cultural aspects of the variety of religious traditions cited in their study, the authors note that transcendence of the self (expressed as selflessness) provide a “more universal construct” that could be approached from multiple vantage points (spiritual and neuropsychological).¹³

⁸ Cosimo Urgesi et al, “The Spiritual Brain: Selective Cortical Lesions Modulate Human Self-Transcendence,” *Neuron* 65 (February 11, 2010): 309–319.

⁹ Brick Johnstone et al, “Selflessness as a Foundation of Spiritual Transcendence: Perspectives from the Neurosciences and Religious Studies,” *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 26:4 (2016): 287 – 303.

¹⁰ Ibid, 290.

¹¹ Ibid, 291.

¹² Ibid, 294.

¹³ Ibid, 296.

In religious studies, transcendence often includes an element of religiousness that refers to the supernatural or a deity. Meerten B. Ter Borg (2008) examines the relationship between transcendence and religion, starting with Thomas Luckmann's idea that man is a religious animal.¹⁴ However, he suggested reversing Luckmann's model. He proposed that man as *animal transcendens* does not always necessarily imply man as *animal religiosum* as Luckmann postulates. Rather, religion is one "almost inescapable consequence of the capacity to transcend."¹⁵ For Ter Borg, "'Transcendence' means to go beyond what is given in the here and now, whether these are physiological impulses or the limitations of time and space."¹⁶ The capacity to transcend is a precondition for religion, as well as being a precondition for the creation of art and sports.¹⁷ In other words, the capacity for transcendence is the seed by which man can become religious; however, this capacity does not necessarily always result in religiosity. Agnosticism and atheism, for example, can also coexist with this capacity for transcendence. Ter Borg supported the notion that the capacity to transcend is a native characteristic of the human being: "I have tried to convince you...that man is an *animal transcendens*."¹⁸

In a study that occupied an intersection between neuroscience and religion, Beauregard and Paquette (2006) ran a functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) study to identify neural correlates of mystical experience in contemplative Carmelite nuns. They adapted W.T. Stace's notions of mysticism¹⁹ to define mystical experience:²⁰

¹⁴ Meerten Ter Borg, "Transcendence and Religion," *Implicit Religion* 11.3 (2008): 229.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 235.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 231.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 232.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 237.

¹⁹ See also W.T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1960).

²⁰ Mario Beauregard, and Vincent Paquette, "Neural correlates of a mystical experience in Carmelite nuns," *Neuroscience Letters* 405 (2006): 187.

Mystical experience is characterized by a sense of union with God. It can also include a number of other elements, such as the sense of having touched the ultimate ground of reality, the experience of timelessness and spacelessness, the sense of union with humankind and the universe, as well as feelings of positive affect, peace, joy and unconditional love.

Although the two authors did not make a direct link between mystical experience and transcendence, their definition of mystical experience has been identified as a component of transcendence in religious traditions like that of the Carmelite sisters they studied. For example, “mystical experience” in Beauregard and Paquette (2006) is similar to and consistent with a Roman Catholic understanding of human openness to transcendence, which is believed to be a fundamental characteristic of the human person in that tradition. An excerpt from the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* summarizes this view:²¹

Openness to transcendence belongs to the human person: man is open to the infinite and to all created beings. He is open above all to the infinite — God — because with his intellect and will he raises himself above all the created order and above himself, he becomes independent from creatures, is free in relation to created things and tends towards total truth and the absolute good. He is open also to others, to the men and women of the world, because only insofar as he understands himself in reference to a “thou” can he say “I”. He comes out of himself, from the self-centered preservation of his own life, to enter into a relationship of dialogue and communion with others.

Mystical experience, then, could reflect the human person receiving and accepting an opportunity for transcendence, which results in the “relationship of dialogue and communion with others.” The Carmelite (Catholic) nuns informed the researchers *a priori* that they could not reach a mystical state at will (“God can’t be summoned at will.”).²² In practical terms, a genuine mystical experience was not possible to capture; it would only be possible to recall memories of them. This is consistent with the understanding that transcendence cannot be grasped or

²¹ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004): paragraph #130.

²² Ibid.

“triggered” but is offered as an opportunity by another (God in their case), which can then be received and accepted.

Beauregard and Paquette compared changes in blood oxygen level dependent (BOLD) signal changes and echoplanar images of the brain (EPI) for baseline and “mystical” conditions on a total of fifteen Carmelite nuns (age range: 23 – 64; mean: 49.9).²³ What they found were significant loci of activation in the brain that suggested several brain regions and neural systems may mediate various aspects of mystical experiences. Although their study was limited by the fact that subjects were asked to remember and relive a mystical experience, the changes observed between baseline and “mystical” conditions could be said to have captured the traces of movement between conditions. The movement may underlie a deeper process that was not captured or handled in the study, suggesting the need for greater study of transcendence as process.

Experience and meaning-making within and beyond the self

Experience, often defined in terms of personal events, encounters, or observations, is a necessary element of the process of transcendence. A sufficient definition of experience is found in *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language* (1964): “an actual living through an event or events; personally undergoing or observing something or things in general as they occur.”²⁴ Not all experiences trigger a transcendent process. A difference exists, for example, between how a person processes experiences considered “everyday” or “ordinary,” and those he or she considers “extraordinary”. The ordinary experience may not be handled in the same way

²³ Mario Beauregard, and Vincent Paquette, “Neural correlates of a mystical experience in Carmelite nuns,” *Neuroscience Letters* 405 (2006): 186 – 190.

²⁴ David B. Guralink, and Joseph H. Friend (Eds.), *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language: College Edition* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1964): 512.

as an extraordinary experience, and what is usually processed as ordinary in one context could be perceived as extraordinary in another. For example, an American man could experience sunlight as “ordinary” on a typical day in a small town in mid-20th century America; that same man could experience sunlight as “extraordinary” a few years later after emerging from weeks or months of solitary confinement in a windowless POW camp cell somewhere in Japan. The person’s classification of an experience as ordinary or extraordinary is contingent upon context, as will be demonstrated in the different POW narratives. The experience of sunlight in the latter context may be processed in such a way as to create extraordinary connections for the person within and beyond himself, tying that experience of sunlight with his residence in a prison camp (space) in a particular moment in time.

Although the psychology literature has gone into extensive detail regarding how humans process their experiences with others in the world,²⁵ for the purposes of this discussion I wish only to make one distinction – that there is a difference between how ordinary and extraordinary experiences are processed. At a fundamental level of processing, Fiske and Taylor (1991) posit that human beings are generally not willing to expend cognitive resources, looking for ways to avoid effortful thinking – that is, they are cognitive misers.²⁶ However, they also acknowledge that the cognitive miser model is “silent on the issue of motivations or feelings of any sort except gaining a rapid, adequate understanding (which is cognitive rather than motivational in flavor).”²⁷ In my view, motivation could alter or suspend the everyday heuristic of cognitive

²⁵ For seminal works on social cognition and the analysis of experience, see below:

J.R. Anderson, *The Adaptive Character of Thought* (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1990); S.T. Fiske and S.E. Taylor, *Social Cognition* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1984); D. Kahneman, P. Slovic, and A. Tversky (Eds.), *Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

²⁶ Susan T. Fiske and Shelley E. Taylor, *Social Cognition: From Brains to Culture, 2nd Edition* (London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2013).

²⁷ Ibid, 15.

miserliness in a way that engages a deeper mode of processing. An example of a source of motivation is a person's recognition of the personal relevance of his or her experience of an extraordinary event.

I propose that living through personally relevant extraordinary events (positive and negative) may suspend this everyday heuristic and cause the person to attempt to attach meaning to them, resulting in an experience being tagged in memory. Extraordinary events can be classified as transcendent (positive) or anti-transcendent (negative), in that they carry markers that either promote or inhibit meaning-making. However, not all transcendent events result in completion of transcendence, and not all anti-transcendent events result in anti-transcendence. This assertion will be discussed further in the section outlining my model of transcendence.

In his discussion of transcendence, Eugene Thomas Long (1999) relates transcendence to our experience of ourselves as beings in the world, related to other persons and things:²⁸

There should be evidence of transcendent reality within our experience as beings in the world...Our way of being in the world is best understood in terms of possible ways of being. We may share much in common and we would not be who we are independently of our histories. Yet in some sense we seem also able to transcend or go beyond... As beings of potentiality, beings on the way, we are always transcending boundaries, moving into new possibilities of being.

For Long, transcendence is related to moving beyond the boundaries (or limitations) of our "becoming," our way of being. Boundaries to moving into new ways of being include suffering and death.²⁹ Experiences of suffering and encounters with death could arguably hold "anti-transcendent" qualities. Long also identifies triggers for transcendence, such as: a) the desire for an explanation of the totality of things; b) the sense of nothingness and mystery in our

²⁸ Eugene Thomas Long, "Quest for Transcendence," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 45:1 (Feb. 1999): 52 – 53.

²⁹ Ibid, 55.

experience; and c) freedom. Freedom, he says, extends us beyond ourselves.³⁰ The deprivation and subsequent re-acquisition of freedom among the POWs studied could, in Long's conception, contribute to their transcendence following the experience. Experience has a social role to play in interpreting, understanding, and explaining one's encounters with people and other things in the world. "Experience" interprets encounters with others and compares judgments."³¹ Meaning-making, then, is part of the experiential machinery that helps people "go beyond," or move into new possibilities of being.

As an experiential meaning-making process, transcendence can serve to stabilize one's sense of self as well as deepen the meaning of events outside oneself, which goes deeper than the activities of interpretation, understanding, or explanation. Peggy Thoits (2013) provides a definition of self that can be adopted in this study – "that aspect of the person that has experiences; reflects on experiences; and acts on self-understandings derived from experiences."³² A stabilization of one's sense of self would be reflected in more consistent, reliable processes of reflection on experiences that deepen interior understanding, in such a way that self is perceived as "a unified, singular, whole."³³

I propose that stabilization of one's sense of self may be traced in narrative form, and can be positioned as a potential outcome of the process of transcendence. It can be observed as the narrator recognizes more consistently what "I am" even as he/she examines what "I was" in the past. Augustine's *Confessions* has been noted for its documentation of transcendent processes in narrative form, specifically in regard to Augustine's sense of self. Andrés G. Niño (2008)

³⁰ Ibid, 56.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Peggy Thoits, "Self, Identity, Stress, and Mental Health," in *Handbook of the Sociology of Mental Health, 2nd edition*, eds. Carol S. Aneshensel, Jo. C. Phelan, and Alex Bierman (New York: Springer, 2013): 357.

³³ Ibid.

observed that once the initial step of “returning to the self” was taken, there was a “gradual deepening into the process of self-transcendence.”³⁴ He concludes Augustine has a paradigm of “restoration of the self” that is a dynamic, endless process in which old questions and conflicts appear and reappear in various forms, following the unevenness of life”;³⁵ however, he does not discuss how Augustine may have also later stabilized his sense of self. In his review of his life, Augustine “selects and interprets events to make particular points about his experience, in an attempt to establish a continuity of the self,”³⁶ which could be the first step in how one begins to stabilize his sense of self.

I briefly exegeted Augustine’s *Confessions*, and found narrative evidence of Augustine’s stabilization of his sense of self. It can be initially observed in how he shifts from the use of the phrase “I was” before Book IX (166 of 172 occurrences, or 89.5%) to “I am” from Book IX onward (56 of 76 occurrences, or 73.4%). Book IX was a pivotal point in Augustine’s narrative. This book recalls some extraordinary experiences around his mother: a) her alcoholism; b) Patricius’ abuse of her; c) and finally, her death. It was also where he made a declaration of himself: “O Lord, I am Thy servant.”³⁷ From this book onward, he reflects on the “I am” more so (56 of 76 occurrences, or 73.4%) than the “I was” (only 18 of 172 occurrences, or 10.4%). The frequent use of “I am” in reference to himself (rather than what God or Creation said to him), particularly in describing himself more consistently in the latter part of *The Confessions*, could indicate a stabilization of his narrative sense of self. For example, he repeatedly acknowledges

³⁴ Andrés Niño, “Spiritual Exercises in Augustine’s Confessions,” *Journal of Religious Health* 47 (2008): 93.

³⁵ Ibid, 100.

³⁶ Ibid, 91.

³⁷ St. Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, Book IX, Ch. 1, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, accessed Mar. 8, 2017, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/augustine/confess.html>.

via the “I am” phrases that he is: a) a sinner, or sinful;³⁸ b) poor and needy;³⁹ and c) something that he “knows not” fully, “whatever I am”.⁴⁰

This example of tracking stabilization of self in Augustine shows that an output of transcendence like “stabilization of one’s sense of self” can be tracked narratively, albeit qualitatively at first. I will search for and detect such outputs in the POW memoirs, also qualitatively.

The narrative self

Until now I have been discussing the “self” without delving into how the narrative dimension affects an analysis of the self. Paul Ricoeur (1991) makes a few assertions about the relationship between something like an autobiography and the self, which are salient to this study, as the POW memoirs also contain autobiographical elements:⁴¹

“a) knowledge of the self is an interpretation; b) the interpretation of the self, in turn, finds narrative, among other signs and symbols, to be a privileged mediation; c) this mediation borrows from history as much as fiction, making the life story a fictive history or, if you prefer, an historical fiction, comparable to those biographies of great men where both history and fiction are found blended together.”

Ricoeur points out that there is an interpretive aspect of the self in narration, and narrative identity resides somewhere in the fusion between history and fiction. In this context of narrative, Ricoeur also responds to a philosophical problem of disentangling personal identity from the conflation of *ipse* (self) and *idem* (sameness) senses of identity. The self (*ipse*), he argues, is not sameness (*idem*). Although I do not use “self” in the same way that Ricoeur does, he does have insights into an understanding of the self, especially as it is communicated in narrative. He says

³⁸ Ibid, Book X, Ch. XXXI.

³⁹ Ibid, Book X, Ch. XXXVI; Book XI, Ch. I.

⁴⁰ Ibid, Book IX, Ch. X; Book X, Ch. II, III, VII, VIII;

⁴¹ Paul Ricoeur, “Narrative Identity,” *Philosophy Today* 35:1 (Spring 1991): 73.

of the dividing line between *ipse* and *idem*: “The break between *ipse* and *idem* finally expresses the more fundamental one between *Dasein* and *Vorhanden/ Zuhanden*. Only *Dasein* is mine, and more generally a self. Things, given and manipulated, can be said to be the same, in the sense of identity as *idem*.”⁴² There is also a point of intersection between *ipse* and *idem*, that is, “permanence over time.”⁴³ These distinctions are important in that time and space serve as a canvas for the process of transcendence to unfold, and there is a difference in my notion of transcendence between “making extraordinary connections *within* and *beyond* the self,” and “*stabilizing* one’s sense of self,” which is a potential outcome of transcendence.

If we look at my definition of transcendence once more: “an experiential meaning-making process helps form extraordinary connections both *within* and *beyond* the self with others, in time and space,” I can offer a few distinctions that may correspond to Ricoeur’s definitions of *ipse* and *idem*. In my definition of transcendence, “self” can be analogized to Ricoeur’s *ipse* sense of self, or that which is “mine.” However, if we examine a potential outcome of transcendence like stabilization of one’s sense of self, which would be reflected in more consistent, reliable processes of reflection on experiences that deepen interior understanding over time, I am using a different dimension of self. These consistent, reliable processes of reflection (stabilization of sense of self) may correspond to the development of Ricoeur’s third and fourth senses of *idem*: continuity and permanence over time. However, this is not a perfect match. Stabilization of one’s sense of self in my model has an existential dimension – allowing the person to more firmly root himself or herself in response to the question: “What am I?” This may also be comparable to Thoits’ more recent definition of self (the italics is my notation): “that *aspect* of the person that has experiences; reflects on experiences; and acts on

⁴² Ibid, 75.

⁴³ Ibid.

self-understandings derived from experiences.”⁴⁴ Extraordinary connections within and beyond the self give the person coordinates within space-time, usually corresponding with specific, meaningful experiences. These coordinates can be referenced in future situations, especially in those that are morally challenging.

Time and space as a canvas for transcendence

Transcendence requires “tags” of space and time in order to give meaning to extraordinary experiences and establish those connections within and beyond the self.

Eugene Long maps our relationship with time:⁴⁵

“We are temporal beings. We exist in the present involved in the heritage of what has been. But we also exist in the future which is coming towards us. Our being is such that in the present we remember the past and anticipate the future. We are becoming as individuals and as entangled in the history of humankind.”

In the narrative context, temporality can have a reciprocal relationship with narrativity,⁴⁶ which can complicate one’s interconnections between personal history and the kind of “history of humankind” that Long refers to, e.g., World War II or the Vietnam War. However, setting aside the potential convolutions of narrative, time and space remain critical operative elements in memory, and are not necessarily separable,⁴⁷ although the concepts are distinct.

Transcendence, which operates on memories of extraordinary experiences in space-time, aids in forming extraordinary connections within and beyond the self, but it must do so in space *and* time. Much of what the POW memoir writers recall are events involving visual-spatial and sensible information in specific temporal contexts. György Buzsáki (2013) noted that “the

⁴⁴ Thoits, “Self, Identity, Stress, and Mental Health,” 357.

⁴⁵ Long, “Quest for Transcendence.”

⁴⁶ Paul Ricoeur, “Narrative time,” *Critical Inquiry* 7:1 (Autumn, 1980): 169.

⁴⁷ K. Schill, and C. Zetsche, “A model of visual spatio-temporal memory: The icon revisited,” *Psychological Research / Psychologische Forschung*, 57 (1995), 88–102.

temporal flow of activity is a framework for recalling thousands of episodic memories,” and that the brain, while it does not generate time, does have neuronal assembly sequences that support the cognitive operation of time-tracking.⁴⁸ He suggests that our brains are wired in way that processes time as we remember events. Sarrazin et al (2004) noted the importance of looking at both spatial and temporal aspects of information in memory, and further demonstrated that one can only study (spatio-temporal) properties of mental images once the organizational (cognitive) processes have reached a steady state.⁴⁹ The memoirist, too, will likely have had to reach this “steady state” of cognition to coherently communicate this information from his memory. Transcendence, then, also operating within memory, inevitably gives meaning in time and space (and those associations will be tagged with spatio-temporal particularities).

Returning to the narrative context, in order for the writer to track a transcendent or anti-transcendent experience, he or she would have to processed its spatio-temporal properties before recounting it in storied form. I propose that as he recounts his story, the resilient American POW memoir writer not only communicates the results of processing these experiences in his narrative, he also leaves evidence of transcendence as he sequences some of his thought processes within the structure of the narrative and demonstrates either stabilization of his sense self or extraordinary connections within and beyond himself.

⁴⁸ György Buzsáki, “Time, space and memory,” *Nature* 497 (30 May 2013): 569.

⁴⁹ Jean-Christophe Sarrazin et al, “Dynamics of Balancing Space and Time in Memory: Tau and Kappa Effects Revisited,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 30:3 (2004): 429.

Resilience

Resilience can be a second-order outcome of transcendence. If the first-order outcomes of transcendence are: a) stabilization of sense of self; and b) extraordinary connections within and beyond the self, then a potential second order outcome could be resilience, that is, as “an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change,”⁵⁰ or more plainly, the ability to bounce back from adversity. Anti-transcendence may have outcomes that work against resilience: a) destabilization of sense of self; b) disintegration or severing of connections within and beyond the self. This section will discuss resilience and its relevance to this study, also highlighting the relationship between transcendence and resilience. Transcendent and anti-transcendent events may carry markers that promote or inhibit the transcendence process, which can also influence the emergence of a second-order outcome like resilience.

Relevance

Resilience remains an area of interest in military psychology. War veterans have often been studied in clinical detail for risk factors like depression, PTSD, suicidal ideation, and related disorders, which indicate problems with resilience. Resilience continues to be elusive as a dimensional outcome of “Total Force Fitness”.⁵¹ Total Force Fitness (TFF) was a framework outlined by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction in 2011 to “optimize the well-being and readiness of the individuals and families of the total force. Success in establishing TFF will enable individuals to sustain optimal well-being and demonstrate the resilience needed to

⁵⁰ “Resilience,” Merriam-Webster dictionary website, accessed Mar. 9, 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/resilience>.

⁵¹ “Chairman’s Total Force Fitness Framework,” CJCSI 3405.01, Defense Technical Information Center website, <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/>, accessed 9/27/14.

carry out assigned missions.”⁵² Spiritual fitness was listed as one of eight domains of fitness. Conceptually, spiritual fitness was defined in the framework as “an individual’s or group’s ability to maintain beliefs, principles, and values needed to provide support in times of stress,”⁵³ a notion which more closely resembles valor as a concept than stands as a distinctive definition of spiritual fitness.⁵⁴

Although spiritual fitness was identified as a contributor to resilience, and transcendence was listed as a component of spiritual fitness, the metrics were so much more aligned with human resource outcomes than the conceptualization of spiritual fitness that they were confusing.⁵⁵ Transcendence was over-psychologized in its operationalization and did not sufficiently consider the degree to which meaning-making is contingent on a cultural or religious context. Neither a strictly psychological nor a sociological variable, transcendence is an experiential variable with a moral dimension, potentially shaped by religious or cultural values.⁵⁶ Measuring transcendence (or spiritual fitness), then, cannot be reduced to psychometrics.

Sweeney et al (2012) attempted to create a universal model for the domain of the human spirit to justify the development of spiritual fitness programs that would be within the law, in a way that avoids religious distinctions.⁵⁷ However when the metrics designed to capture these elements take a cookie cutter approach and flatten the concepts into forms and subsequent programs that are potentially incongruent with the actual state of the individual’s spirituality, the resulting programs can damage or even fracture a person’s apparatus for meaning-making.

⁵² Ibid, A-3.

⁵³ Ibid, A-E-1.

⁵⁴ Cabrini Pak, “Spiritual Fitness: Red Herring or Distinctive Domain of Spiritual Fitness?” (paper presented at the annual meeting for the American Psychological Association, Toronto, Ontario, August 6-9, 2015).

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ A. Michael MacLean et al, “Transcendence and the Moral Self: Identity Integration, Religion, and Moral Life,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43 (2004): 429 - 437.

⁵⁷ Patrick J. Sweeney, et al, “Spiritual Fitness,” *National Defense University Press* 66 (3rd Quarter, 2012): 37.

Attempting to “improve” spiritual fitness of service members from certain traditions with techniques and beliefs from other theologically incompatible ones, as in the case of applying meditative techniques with tantric yoga origins on Roman Catholics, can run the risk of causing more damage to the individual’s spirituality and sense of self in the long run than aiding him or her.⁵⁸

Since very little has been done by way of narrative analysis of the memoirs of veterans with known resilience from a particularly traumatic experience, like a POW experience, I chose to perform a qualitative study of the role of transcendence (as defined in this study) in these veterans, especially in their first-person accounts. Although I am not exploring the concept of resilience directly in this study, the study of transcendence may still contribute to a more balanced (and positive) understanding of resilience of the military service member by studying how those with *known* resilience document their personal navigation through particularly traumatic experiences.

Barbara Hanfstingl (2013) analyzed which aspects of transcendence could have a positive or negative influence on general resilience. She looked at two approaches to the study of transcendence – one that was connected to personality psychology (“ego transcendence”), and another that was connected to mysticism or spiritual experiences (“spiritual transcendence”).⁵⁹ Reducing resilience to psychological resistance, her study was based on the assumption that psychological resilience is a possible mediator between spirituality and health. Using a questionnaire survey (N=265 people aged 18 to 71, 72.5% female and 27.2% male), she found that three variables were significant predictors of psychological resilience: “crisis of meaning,

⁵⁸ Pak, “Spiritual Fitness: Red Herring or Distinctive Domain of Spiritual Fitness?”

⁵⁹ Barbara Hanfstingl, “Ego and Spiritual Transcendence: Relevance to Psychological Resilience and the Role of Age,” *Evidence-based Complementary and Alternative Medicine* (2013): 1.

self-determination, and positive self-motivation.”⁶⁰ “Crisis of meaning (e.g., my life is useless)” was demonstrated as a negative predictor of resilience,⁶¹ while self-determination and positive self-motivation were positive predictors. She also found a difference in positive predictors by age groups. Using the cutoff of 30 years of age as the divider between “younger” and “older” subjects, she found that the young sample had only one significant predictor of resilience: secular self-determination. In the older subjects, the most powerful predictor of resilience was “positive self-motivation,” which she identified as an implicit measure of self-regulation. In addition, she found that “oneness and good power” were also significant predictors of resilience, while “spiritual insight” was a negative predictor.⁶² The authors note that this negative relationship between spiritual insight and resilience may be age-related. The effects intensified with increasing age. Spiritual insight is characterized in their study as “keeping control when experiencing spirituality,” and this striving for control in situations which may not be controllable can be an obstacle to resilience, especially when aging individuals face multiple stressors.

“Oneness” can be compared to the notion of “feeling at one with the universe,” and “good power” emphasizes the feeling that “one is positively influenced by a power outside of one’s control.”⁶³ Good power, as a positive influencer of resilience, may have religious and cultural dimensions. Self-determination, positive self-motivation, and a sense of oneness with the universe, may be related to the notion of stabilization of self as an outcome of transcendence. If so, then the results of my study may offer some connections between transcendence and resilience.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 7.

⁶¹ Ibid, 4 – 5.

⁶² Ibid, 7.

⁶³ Ibid, 3 – 4.

Suffering, pain, torture, and stress

Stressors in the form of pain and suffering can negatively affect one's sense of self, and extraordinary experiences laced with these stressors could be anti-transcendent, preventing meaning-making from occurring, and disintegrating or fracturing connections within and beyond the self. Long mentioned that barriers to moving into new ways of being (transcending) include suffering and death.⁶⁴

Elaine Scarry's (1985) structural analysis of torture provides some insights into the challenges of communicating the experience of pain and suffering in any language, in addition to its effect on one's sense of self. Physical pain, for example, does not simply resist language, but actively destroys, it, "bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned."⁶⁵ One could argue that extraordinary physical pain fractures one's deep connections to language. She says later that physical pain "deconstructs it into the pre-language of cries and groans."⁶⁶ Psychological suffering, on the other hand, "does have referential content, is susceptible to verbal objectification...that...there is virtually no piece of literature that is not about suffering, no piece of literature that does not stand by ready to assist us."⁶⁷

On the topic of torture, Scarry notes the consistent pairing of a primary physical act with a primary verbal act:⁶⁸

"Torture consists of a primary physical act, the infliction of pain, and a primary verbal act, the interrogation. The first rarely occurs without the second. As is true of the present period, most historical episodes of torture, such as the Inquisition, have inevitably

⁶⁴ Long, "Quest for Transcendence."

⁶⁵ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985): 4.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 172.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 11.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 28.

included the element of interrogation: the pain is traditionally accompanied by ‘the Question.’”

Torture, as an extraordinary experience of physical pain, coupled with the forceful request to use language when the pain is actively destroying it, could be classified as an anti-transcendent experience. In order to illustrate the way in which pain can cause a person’s world to disintegrate, Scarry describes a period of martial law in the Philippines, during which time men and women described “being tied or handcuffed in a constricted position for hours, days, and in some cases months to a chair, to a cot, to a filing cabinet, to a bed; being beaten with “family-sized soft drink bottles” or having a hand crushed with a chair.”⁶⁹ The extreme abuse she describes here is also echoed by the WWII POW memoir writers who surrendered in Bataan and were subsequently forced to walk the Bataan Death March prior to being shipped to Japan. In talking about how objects in the world were paired with inflicting great pain on human beings, Scarry notes the disintegrative effect of the person’s pain: ⁷⁰

“The person’s pain causes his world to disintegrate; and, at the same time, the disintegration of the world is here, in the most literal way possible, made painful, made the direct cause of the pain. That is, in the conversion of a refrigerator into a bludgeon, the refrigerator disappears; its disappearance objectifies the disappearance of the world.”

This corresponds to a description of *anomy*, which would represent a collapse of one’s socially constructed world into meaninglessness.⁷¹ Although torture in the context of American POWs has been studied extensively in psychological, military, and literary streams of research, the notion of anti-transcendence, part of the paradox of the POW experience, receives virtually no attention in the literature. This is one reason why I chose POW memoirs over other kinds of military memoirs by resilient American service members.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 41.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, 23.

Peter J. Burke (1991) noted how stress is an autonomic activity resulting from the interruption of “some organized action or thought process,” and that interruption of more salient processes like identity can lead to “a heightened autonomic activity,” experienced as distress.⁷² He defined an identity process as “a continuously operating, self-adjusting feedback loop,” such that individuals are “continually adjusting behavior to keep their reflected appraisals congruent with their identity standards or references.”⁷³ Negative extraordinary or repeated stressors, then, can have a negative effect on identity processes, which can also impact meaning-making, if we look upstream in the process model of transcendence.

⁷² Peter J. Burke, “Identity processes and social stress,” *American Sociological Review* 56 (Dec. 1991), pg. 836

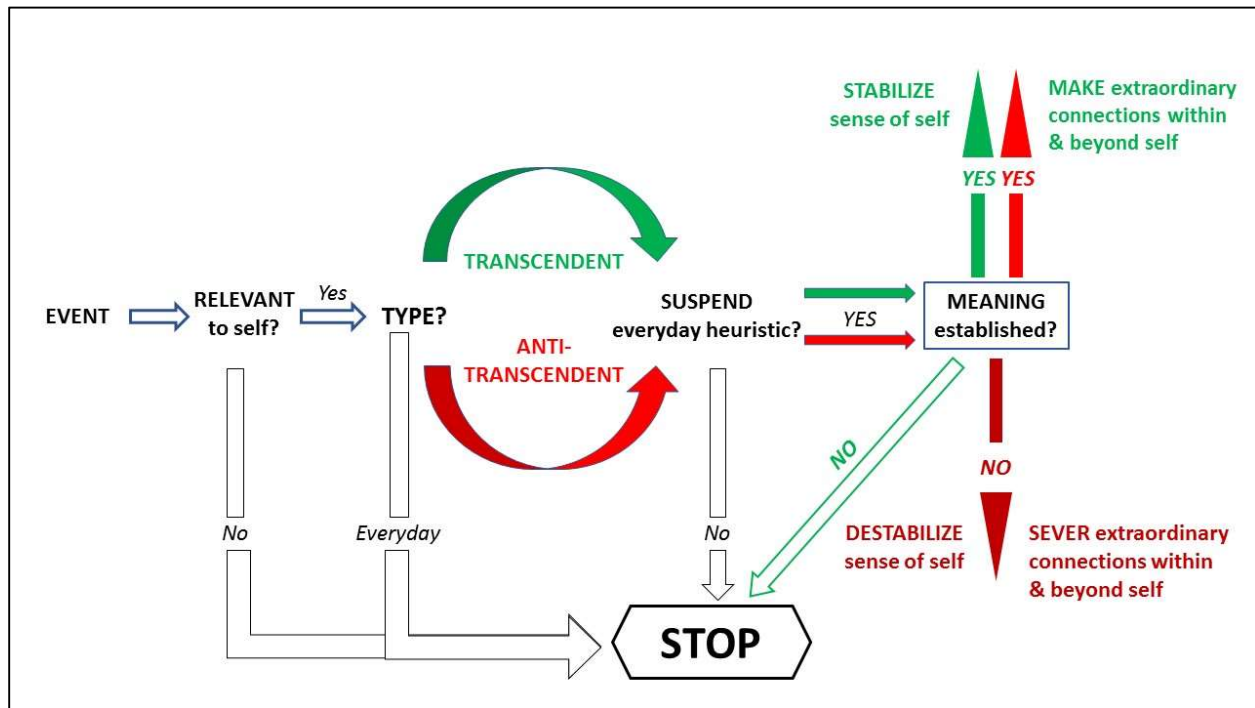
⁷³ *Ibid*, 840.

A Model of Transcendence and Anti-Transcendence

Figure 1 illustrates my conceptual model of transcendence and anti-transcendence. I will describe the elements of my model from left to right in the diagram. Beginning at the far left of the diagram with an “event,” human beings are exposed to dozens, sometimes hundreds of events every day. Not all of them are personally relevant, and most events are categorized as ordinary, or “everyday,” in which cases the individual does not process them for deeper meaning. Rather, they “stop” – they use an everyday heuristic instead. This suggests that transcendence is not often entered. If a person experiences an event that is both relevant to himself/herself and is extraordinary, this may suspend his/her everyday heuristic and cause him or her to attempt to establish meaning.

“Establishing meaning,” or meaning-making, is the “black box” of transcendence. By “black box” I mean that it is a process whose inputs and outputs are known, but the internal structure is not well known or understood. Although I hope that my analysis of the POW memoirs will help open a window into this “black box,” my primary objective is to positively confirm transcendence as an experiential meaning-making process, in time and space, using extraordinary experiences as “inputs” and producing “outputs” (if meaning is established) such as stabilization of one’s sense of self and the creation of extraordinary connections both *within* and *beyond* the self with others.

Figure 1. A Model of Transcendence and Anti-Transcendence

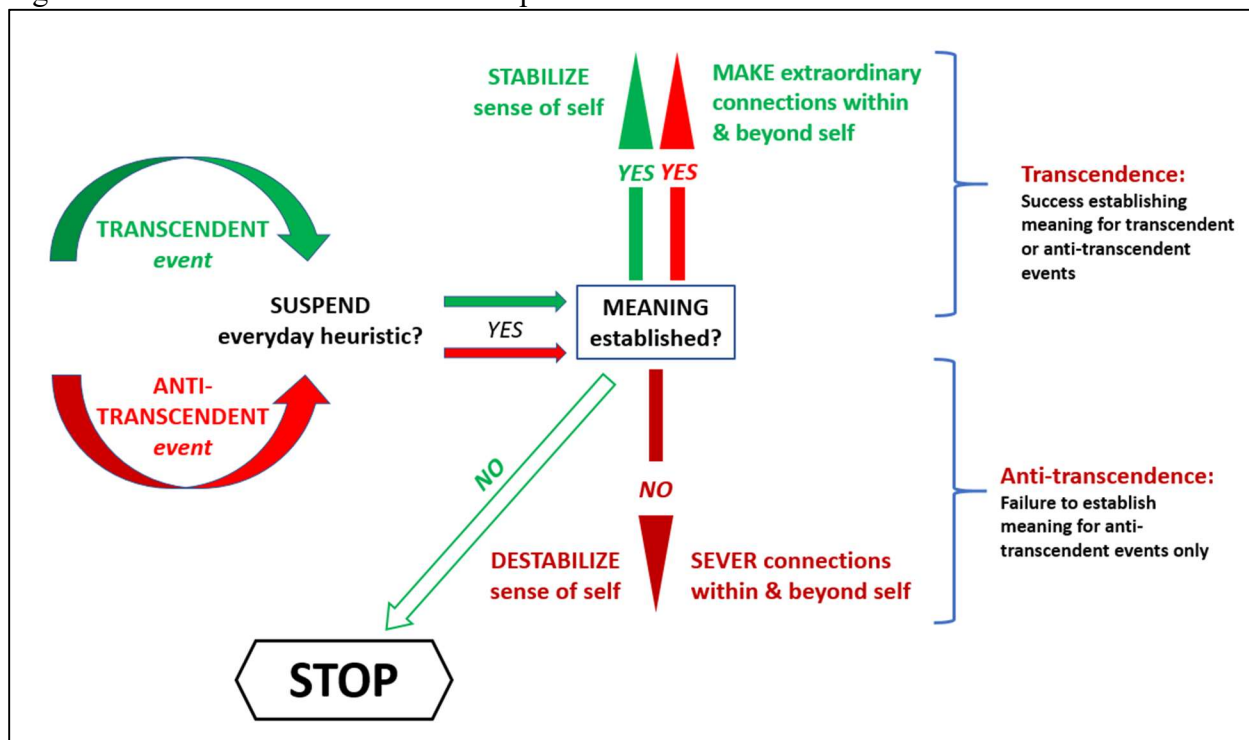


The solid green arrows represent the possible paths of a relevant, extraordinary, transcendent *event* through the “black box” of meaning-making, and the red arrows represent the possible paths of a relevant, extraordinary, anti-transcendent event through the same black box. Inasmuch as the individual successfully establishes meaning for a relevant, extraordinary, transcendent event, the two possible “outputs” of such a process are: a) stabilization of the self; and/or b) making extraordinary connections within and beyond the self. The same would be true of successful meaning-making of a relevant, extraordinary, *anti*-transcendent event.

Transcendence as *process*, not to be confused with a transcendent *event*, is that which successfully attaches meaning to an extraordinary, personally relevant *event*. The events can carry transcendent or anti-transcendent markers, sometimes both. Figure 2 illustrates the difference between *transcendence* as process and *anti-transcendence* as anti-process, or failure to establish meaning for extraordinarily negative personally relevant events. The red arrows track

the possible paths of an anti-transcendent *event* or moment, and the green arrows track the possible paths of a transcendent *event* or moment.

Figure 2. Difference between event and process



It is possible for personally relevant transcendent and anti-transcendent events or experiences *not* to have meaning established, even when they suspend the everyday heuristic. The person may have tried to establish meaning but failed, or may have entered the black box but exited before completing the process of meaning-making. The outcomes are different depending on whether the relevant and extraordinary experience was positive or negative. I propose that transcendent experiences for which meaning is *not* established go the same route as relevant everyday experiences, which are absorbed but not further examined mentally ("stop"). The green outlined (not filled) arrow in Figures 1 and 2 signifies that meaning was not established for the transcendent event after the everyday heuristic was suspended.

Anti-transcendent experiences (extraordinarily negative, personally relevant), which as discussed earlier could include pain, torture, repeated stress, and crises of meaning, for which meaning is *not* assigned may result in an “anti-process” mode – a failure to establish meaning for the extraordinarily negative, personally relevant event. The result is one or two by-products: a) destabilization of one’s sense of self; and b) a disintegration or severing of deep connections within and beyond the self as his/her world. The solid red arrow pointing downward from “meaning established” signifies this path. I am proposing here that extraordinary, relevant, anti-transcendent experiences that are *not* processed tend to have a negative or deleterious effect on one’s sense of self and/or his/her meaningful connections within and beyond himself/herself. This is not necessarily true of extraordinary, relevant, and transcendent events: when meaning is not established, they dwell in the realm of the everyday heuristic outputs, until such time as the person does reprocess the event and successfully establishes meaning.

Conclusion

The resilient American service members in this study who survived and thrived after a POW experience were somehow able to make meaning of both transcendent and anti-transcendent events experienced in captivity, while living in conditions that could accurately be described as pathological normalcy. After release, many married and had families, some went on to a military career while others walked a civilian path, and some became politically active, (namely, McCain, Thorsness, Jefferson, and Zinke) in the public square. All but one lived past eighty years, and three are still alive at the time of this study. Nick Rowe, assassinated at the age of 51, is the only one of the deceased memoirists who did not die of natural causes.

Transcendence and its effect on one's sense of self as well as connections made within and beyond the self are the central points of focus for this study. As a native dimension of human existence, transcendence can be compared across individuals, and potentially across time periods, locations, and cultural or religious contexts. Successful meaning-making of extraordinary, personally relevant events can occur through the process of transcendence, leading to at least two possible outcomes: a) stabilization of one's sense of self, and b) extraordinary connections within and beyond the self. These outcomes can have a second-order effect: resilience, or the ability to bounce back from adversity. Extraordinary, personally relevant events can carry markers that promote or inhibit transcendence, which are conceptually referred to as transcendent and anti-transcendent, respectively. These markers are traced in the narratives provided by each of the memoirists in this study.

I define transcendence as an experiential meaning-making process that helps form extraordinary connections both *within* and *beyond* the self with others, in time and space. I further define anti-transcendence as an "anti-process," resulting in by-products antonymous to transcendence. If a "process" is: "a) a natural phenomenon marked by gradual changes that lead toward a particular result; b) a series of actions or operations conducing to an end,"⁷⁴ then an "anti-process" can be defined as an *unnatural* phenomenon marked by *sharp, discontinuous* changes that prevent or block a particular result. Where transcendence is a meaning-making process, anti-transcendence, as an anti-process, prevents meaning-making from occurring, and may in fact catalyze *anomy*, which would represent a collapse of one's socially constructed world into meaninglessness.⁷⁵ Insofar as transcendence can result in extraordinary connections

⁷⁴ "Process," Merriam-Webster dictionary website, accessed Mar. 17, 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/process>.

⁷⁵ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, 23.

within and beyond the self, the by-products of anti-transcendence are the opposite: disintegration or fracturing of connections within and beyond the self.

Experience is the fundamental matter that transcendence handles. Experiences can be categorized as ordinary or extraordinary, and depending on how they are mentally categorized, they may or may not trigger transcendence. Ordinary (or everyday) events are often processed using a heuristic that enables one to progress through the day without expending too much in the way of cognitive resources.⁷⁶ I propose that living through personally relevant extraordinary events (positive and negative), resulting in an “experience,” may suspend this everyday heuristic and cause the person to attempt to attach meaning to them. Extraordinary events can be classified as transcendent or anti-transcendent in that they carry markers that either promote or inhibit meaning-making. However, not all transcendent experiences result in completion of transcendence, and not all anti-transcendent experiences result in anti-transcendence. My model of transcendence and anti-transcendence proposes that an anti-transcendent experience can be transcended insofar as meaning was successfully established to that experience, such that it helped stabilize one’s sense of self and made extraordinary connections within and beyond the self.

The self is depicted in narrative form in this study. Some nuances of the term were noted here to differentiate between something like Ricoeur’s *ipse* and *idem* senses of the self.⁷⁷ My definition of transcendence refers to how extraordinary connections are formed within and beyond the self, and in this context, “self” is more consistent with Ricoeur’s *ipse* sense, or that

⁷⁶ Susan T. Fiske and Shelley E. Taylor, *Social Cognition: From Brains to Culture, 2nd Edition* (London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2013).

⁷⁷ Ricoeur used “identity” interchangeably with “self” when he referred to the *ipse* sense of self, but did not assign the *idem* sense a label of “self.” Rather *idem* as sameness had multiple levels or senses, which he named in more detail in “Narrative Identity,” *Philosophy Today* 35:1 (1991): 74.

which is “mine.” When referring to an outcome of transcendence like “stabilization of the self,” “self” in this instance is more consistent with Ricoeur’s third and fourth senses of *idem*, or that which remains continuous and permanent over time; however, I propose that stabilization of one’s sense of self in my model also has an existential dimension. When a person’s sense of self is stabilized, he/she is firmly rooted in response to the question: “What am I?”.

Resilience, a persistently salient concept in American military psychology, continues to be an elusive outcome of “fitness” as defined in military terms. Defined as an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change, resilience is sought by military professionals who must ensure that their people can be deployed numerous times, sometimes in severely adverse contexts, and still bounce back to a ready state. Often, war veterans are studied when they present with contrary indicators to resilience, like PTSD, depression, suicidal ideation, or crises of meaning. Attempts have been made to connect “spiritual fitness” with resilience, although, as I argued in a previous work, the metrics were so much more aligned with human resource outcomes than the conceptualization of spiritual fitness that they were potentially confounding.⁷⁸ Furthermore, transcendence as a component of spiritual fitness was over-psychologized in its operationalization and did not sufficiently consider the degree to which meaning-making is contingent on a cultural or religious context. Although there have been other studies connecting aspects of transcendence to general resilience, they, too, remain reduced to psychological variables. My use of narrative analysis may offer an alternative method to studying transcendence, especially as it is experienced by service members with known resilience from a particularly traumatic experience like a POW experience.

⁷⁸ Pak, “Spiritual Fitness: Red Herring or Distinctive Domain of Spiritual Fitness?”

The memoir writers' recollections of suffering, pain, and torture merited a brief discussion here as to their relevance to transcendence, anti-transcendence, and the self. Stressors in the form of pain and suffering can negatively affect one's sense of self, and extraordinary experiences laced with these stressors could be anti-transcendent, preventing meaning-making from occurring, and disintegrating or fracturing connections within and beyond the self. Communicating pain via language is also a challenge for the writer. Physical pain, for example, does not simply resist language, but actively destroys it, "bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned."⁷⁹ One could argue that extraordinary physical pain fractures one's deep connections to language. Torture combines physical act with linguistic (or verbal) acts, making the experience of pain paradoxical and potentially anomic. Yet, somehow, among the resilient American POW memoir writers in this study, they were able to attach meaning to these experiences via language. As the memoirist recounts his story (including those of pain, suffering, and torture), he not only communicates the results of processing these experiences, he also leaves evidence of transcendence as he sequences some of his meaning-making processes within the structure of the narrative.

My conceptual model of transcendence and anti-transcendence, as explained above, handles experiential "input" with two possible markers, sometimes carrying both markers: transcendent (positive extraordinary) and anti-transcendent (negative extraordinary). If these events suspend one's everyday heuristic, then the individual will attempt to establish meaning. This "meaning-making" is the black box of transcendence, which, if successful, generates at least two kinds of "outputs" – first, extraordinary connections are made within and beyond the self;

⁷⁹ Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, 4.

second, stabilization of one's sense of self. If meaning is not established, the formerly transcendent experience goes the same route as everyday experiences and is absorbed, but not further examined. Failure to make meaning of the formerly anti-transcendent experience, however, can result in destabilization of one's sense of self and a disintegration or severing of deep connections within and beyond the self as his/her world.

The next section will explain my method for analyzing the memoirs. A database of narrative fragments for each narrator will be populated and analyzed that include key words and phrases reflecting transcendent and anti-transcendent experiences before capture, during captivity, and after release. The database design will include capture of narrative fragments like: how narrators integrate past/future to make meaning for the present (or not); encounters with stressors and their opposites; role of the memoirist's background (religious, cultural, or ethnic); and sense of self. The narratives will also be compared with each other, both at the narrative fragment level and their more holistic narrative structures.

Part III – Analysis

This section contains eight parts. The first two sections provide additional context to my method – from memoir selection to narrative analysis. I provide the rationale for the memoir selection and how I developed a method to test my model of transcendence around five topics. For example, I first describe how I established a “baseline” of everyday events for each memoirist. Then I show how the transcendentals (the true, good, and beautiful) and their opposites were used to tag extraordinary events as “transcendent” or “anti-transcendent.” The last three topics delved more deeply into the methodological implications of the “outputs” of transcendence, looking at stabilization of the self and its contrary, as well as extraordinary connections within and beyond the self, and their contraries, including racial stereotypes and racism in America during World War II, which is particularly relevant to Alexander Jefferson, the World War II memoirist who was a Tuskegee airman. The next section describes the method, from how the database was designed and populated to how narrative fragments were tracked. It also discusses the challenges to analysis.

The remaining sections comprise memoir analyses, beginning with World War II memoirs (Germany, then Japan). I first analyzed each work with a selection of fragments, then did cross-comparisons of transcendence between memoirists in each location and between the groups of memoirists across locations. The Vietnam War memoir analysis follows, again beginning with the individual works, then across works. The last section compares transcendence patterns across war periods.

Memoir selection

Although there are numerous memoirs worth analyzing, I applied some criteria that made the selection a bit more focused. First, I looked at two time periods: World War II and the Vietnam War. These two time periods represent conditions before and after the Code of Conduct was introduced to troops in 1955,¹ which as a formula contains six articles affirming the service member's identity and responsibilities, especially if captured. The Code of Conduct serves as a guide for American prisoners of war and has been cited as a source of support for those service members who were captured since its introduction.² I wanted to test whether the Code of Conduct was mentioned more frequently than the Geneva Accords by resilient American former POWs, and see whether there was a notable difference in how service members leaned on these codes in the two time periods, especially as they transcended extraordinarily difficult circumstances. In the end, however, there was no significant difference between World War II and Vietnam War memoirists' references to a code or convention. The Vietnam War memoirists generally referred more to the Geneva Conventions than the Code of Conduct.

Second, I looked for service members with known resilience (no known suicide attempts after release, publicly available documentation that they led functional lives) and from the different branches (Army, Navy, Air Force [or Air Corps/Tuskegee]). All but one of the memoirists lived past the age of eighty years, and three remain alive at the time of this study. Nick Rowe, the exception, died at the age of 51 years, assassinated in the Philippines while working with the CIA to penetrate the New People's Army (NPA) and its parent communist party.³ I provide some further context about Rowe here given the way in which he died. Before

¹ Miles, "Code of Conduct: Guide to Keeping the Faith."

² Ibid.

³ "Colonel James "Nick" Rowe, Inducted 2 October 2008," United States Army Special Operations Command..

his assassination, Rowe left his mark on what would be known as his legacy – the SERE course (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape) for Special Forces training.⁴ He was remembered as a “brave man who knew what he was getting into when he was sent to the Philippines...he walked like an Army officer, he talked like one, and he died like one.”⁵ He appeared by all accounts to have bounced back from his POW experience in Vietnam, and was highly decorated during his military career. Biographical details of the remaining memoirists can be found in Part I of this study.

Finally, I wanted to include the memoir of a resilient African American service member in at least one of the time periods to study how he transcended his POW experience during the war and his experiences of racism, at home and/or abroad. Although Jefferson’s memoir focused primarily on his military experience and training as it related to the war and his eventual capture and release, his work had 200 repetitions of “Black(s),” “Negro(es),” or “niggers,” and 116 repetitions of “white(s)”. Only one other memoirist made any mention of race in his memoir (Biggs, World War II), which totaled only four mentions of “white” in reference to women or men. Two of Biggs’ repetitions referred to Japanese racism against the “white race,” and the other two mentions referred to white women seen in Guam. My analysis of Jefferson’s memoir will discuss his handling of at least two types of extraordinary, personally relevant experiences: capture and imprisonment as a POW, and racism at home in the United States.

Although I did not select memoirs for religiosity or spiritual practices, these dimensions of meaning-making did emerge in some of the narratives during data collection. When narrative fragments demonstrated evidence of progression through transcendence or failure to transcend

⁴ Keating, “Col. James ‘Nick’ Rowe.”

⁵ “James Nicholas Rowe, Colonel, United States Army,” Arlington Cemetery website, Last updated Dec. 17, 2005, accessed Mar. 22, 2017, <http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/jamesnic.htm>.

anti-transcendent events, they were extracted and analyzed. Fragments varied in religious or spiritual content. For example, Richard Gordon recalls that many prisoners lost their faith in the Japanese prison camps during World War II: “I am afraid that prison camp life under the Japanese created many an agnostic and a few atheists.”⁶ Gordon’s fragment was not included in the analysis because his observation was not connected to a personally relevant, extraordinary event. The observation appeared more to be embedded in an “everyday heuristic” that described the frequent loss of faith in prison camps. Yet Herbert Zincke recalls the opposite experience close to the end of his POW experience: “I forgot the hated word “war” and our lowly state as prisoners of war. A feeling of being near God swept over me, and I fell into a restful sleep for an hour or so.”⁷ During the Vietnam War, examples of religiosity or spiritual practices included Thorsness’ account of when all the POWs in his section decided to “have church,” praying the Our Father and Nick Rowe’s reflection on how Psalm 23 was a pivotal turning point.

My choice to include McCain’s earlier memoir, published a few months after his release in 1973, and to exclude a later work that partially reflects on his POW experience twenty years later, requires some explanation here. This study analyzed a sample of memoirs that focused primarily on the memoirists’ experiences as prisoners of war, with the goal of tracking their transcendence as a meaning-making process, with special attention to the effects of transcendence on their sense of self or extraordinary connections within and beyond the self. There is a benefit of looking at a spread of memoirs written at different times after POWs were released, ranging from two months to almost fifty years. One such benefit is to see how differently memory and recollection of transcendence may be manifested in the text. Since this is a qualitative study, the insights gained by looking at the memoirists’ accounts at different stages

⁶ Gordon, *Horyo: Memoirs of an American POW*, 184.

⁷ Zincke, *Mitsui Madhouse: Memoir of a US Army Air Corps POW in World War II*, 145.

in their lives could serve to inform more longitudinally oriented studies for individuals, or studies focused on just one stage in a person's life cycle, like young adulthood, middle age, or late adulthood.

I had three issues with using McCain's 1999 work, *Faith of my Fathers: A Family Memoir*. First, this later memoir was not primarily focused on his POW experience. It instead focused on tracing a family history and tradition of service in the US military. It secondarily applied this context as a lens to his memory of his POW experience in Vietnam. Second, McCain's first memoir was authored alone, while *Faith of my Fathers* was co-authored by Mark Salter, a member of McCain's staff since 1989, or about ten years by the time it was published. I had no way of ascertaining how much of the narrative was attributable to Salter's style of storytelling and how much remained solely McCain's. Third, McCain was the only memoirist of the sample that wrote recollections of the same experience decades apart. Tracing his meaning-making at these different time periods would introduce a longitudinal element of meaning-making that is not comparable with the other memoirists. A different study in which meaning-making is compared across different narrative time frames for the same memoirist would have justified the inclusion of multiple memoirs of the same person published in different time periods, but as I mentioned earlier, that was not the purpose of this study.

Developing a method to test the model

The novelty of my theory of transcendence as a meaning-making process, along with the material that I chose to use to test it (text of POW memoirs), required the development of a customized method to detect, analyze, and confirm or disconfirm the different components of transcendence, including the "inputs" and "outputs" of meaning-making. Although there has

been some work in studying changes in the self in certain types of narrative as well as the use of language in military memoirs, the work is often limited to very narrow contexts. For example, Arthur Frank's (1993) study of self-change focuses on illness narratives, while Chouliaraki (2014) analyzes military memoirs in their use of a particular trope (e.g., irony). Other methods of narrative analysis refer primarily to verbal interview or non-memoir narrative forms, which carry with them different assumptions about overall structure of the narrative or the continuity of the narrator's story and sense of self over time.

Jean Calloud (1976) posits that textual systems of meaning can be found at the level of discourse, but often not at the level of the sentence. It means that analysis of such text would need to permit a reconstitution of that "sub-textual" space.⁸ The "sub-textual" space contains "clusters of meaning" which "can be accounted for when the discourse as a whole is taken into consideration."⁹ The implication here for my study is that analysis cannot be limited to simple word repetition or sentence structure, but needs to look at what the memoirist is trying to say as he reveals his experiences via chunked forms of discourse. Roland Barthes refers to some principles of narrative analysis, one of which is worth mentioning here. The principle of formalization says that the language of narrative is identifiable beyond language proper; beyond the sentence, where several sentences are set together, a "second linguistics" works at the site of the narrative analysis – a translanguistics. The analyst is tasked with uniting a corpus of narratives to attempt to extract some kind of meaningful structure from them.¹⁰ Tracking the "inputs" and "outputs" of transcendence as a process requires more holistic attention to the

⁸ Calloud, *Structural Analysis of Narrative*, 5.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *The Semiotic Challenge*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971):223 – 224.

prose; it cannot reduce the text to atomic linguistic units, whether it be word repetitions or single sentences. Instead, it requires an application of this principle of formalization.

Referring to Figure 1, I had to develop a method of analysis that would qualitatively identify “inputs” to this meaning process, distinguishing between “everyday” events and the extraordinary, as well as between transcendent and anti-transcendent qualities in extraordinary events that triggered meaning-making; and that would help detect such “outputs” of meaning-making, like stabilization of one’s sense of self and extraordinary connections within and beyond the self. This section will explain the component aspects of my narrative analysis of the memoirs, beginning with establishing a contextual baseline of “everyday” event, which helps to sketch an operative everyday heuristic for each memoirist, and moving through the conceptual model outlined in Part II of this study. I will describe how events captured in the narrative fragments were screened and tagged as transcendent or anti-transcendent, as well what characterized the different kinds of outcomes from successful meaning-making (or failure to establish meaning, also referred to as anti-process). I will discuss how stabilization or destabilization of the self manifests itself in the memoirs, as well as how extraordinary connections within and beyond the self are established or severed.

Establishing a contextual “baseline” of “everyday” events

While there were certainly similarities in conditions experienced in the different camps, each memoirist developed a relatively unique sense of “pathological normalcy,” providing textual cues to their “everyday heuristic” with the use of words that indicated a certain normalcy or routine within the context of a POW camp. Inferring a “baseline” of the “everyday” events

was necessary to establish for each memoirist. Much of their “everyday” was not part of the “everyday” experienced by free Americans living at home.

For example, Ralph Sirianni, Jr. noted in the first three months of his imprisonment (*Stalag Luft I*, World War II) some things that they faced every day: “lack of respect, shortage of food, fear of the armed guards and their vicious dogs, and lack of proper medical treatment.”¹¹ When he was released, he noted that the prisoners developed a habit to cope with their feelings of anger and hatred at being locked up: vulgar language. The use of the language became so habitual that it was almost unconscious, slipping into an everyday mode of speaking. He described a scenario that unfolded in the first few days with his family: “One time I was sitting at the table with my parents and wanted the salt shaker. The words came out of my mouth automatically. Without thinking, I said, “Pass me the f..... salt shaker.”¹²

During the Vietnam War, Leo Thorsness noted the regularity of getting beaten. Being caught “tapping” (communicating using tap codes) with fellow POWs “usually meant a beating.”¹³ If a POW “refused to bow, or bowed wrong, it meant a beating. The same routine had to be followed each time the door closed.”¹⁴ The “routine” of torture changed between the first three years, during which torture was a more regular occurrence, and the last three years, during which time it was not: “Once we were in the big cells, it took about a month to settle into a routine in which torture was the exception rather than the norm; in which talking aloud was permitted and no subjects were forbidden.”¹⁵

¹¹Sirianni, *POW #3959: Memoir of a World War II Airman Shot Down over Germany*, 89.

¹² Ibid, 140 – 141.

¹³ Thorsness, *Surviving Hell: A POW's Journey*, 36.

¹⁴ Ibid, 43.

¹⁵ Ibid, 89.

These are just two examples of how a memoirist gave textual cues as to what was considered “everyday” in his experience as a POW. I will be establishing a brief “baseline” for each memoirist in the analyses, with contextual tags used to demonstrate when events appeared to be processed by an “everyday” heuristic. Extraordinary, personally relevant events, positive and negative, would provide contextual cues that their everyday heuristic was suspended and the memoirist attempted to establish meaning. Among other things, these events were usually embedded with superlatives (e.g., lowest, worst, best, highest, unlike anything I imagined possible, never seen a better example).

Sorting and tagging events as transcendent or anti-transcendent

One way to quickly categorize events as transcendent or anti-transcendent during data collection was to observe how the authors described or captured the transcendental aspects of these events (the good, true, and beautiful) and/or their opposites (bad, false, ugly). Sometimes these descriptors were explicitly noted by the memoirists (e.g., the goodness of being free, the beauty of women, natural beauty, and inability to lie), and other times their descriptions coincided with definitions of these terms. Although the transcendentals are well-known, perhaps an example of how they have been used in literature will help illustrate the usefulness of tagging an event as transcendent or anti-transcendent.

C.S. Lewis is best known as a beloved author and literary master associated with such works as the *Chronicles of Narnia* series, *Mere Christianity*, *The Great Divorce*, and *The Screwtape Letters*. Yet what may not be as well-known is his training in Greek and Latin literature and the “Greats” (philosophy and ancient history).¹⁶ In his analysis of Lewis’

¹⁶ David Baggett, Gary R. Habermas, and Jerry L. Walls, eds. *C.S. Lewis as Philosopher: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008): 14.

philosophy of truth, goodness, and beauty, Peter Kreeft notes that Lewis defines truth as “Aristotle and common sense do, as correspondence with reality.”¹⁷ He also notes how Lewis defines goodness with God, as relationship with God. Beauty, although at the same time obscure and mysterious, he says, is also perceptible and objectively real. The way in which a person “knows” about truth, goodness, and beauty, is through “experience, reason, and authority.”¹⁸ “Authority” refers to the way in which “reason” sends us to it – that is, “one of the things our reason tells us is to check the results of our own thinking by the opinions of the wise.”¹⁹ Although C.S. Lewis was immersed in a religious and/or philosophical context, his literature reflects a familiar search for transcendence that is relevant to the human experience.

The memoirists frequently, although not always explicitly, note the transcendentals and their opposites in their works, in ways similar to how Lewis describes them in his works. Some events carried both transcendent and anti-transcendent markers. As the memoirs were sifted for narrative fragments, they were tagged with these markers to help categorize the events as transcendent or anti-transcendent. The tags (good/bad, true/false, beautiful/ugly) served as a way of roughly sifting through the thousands of fragments in order to select a few that allowed for a more detailed analysis.

The self: stabilization and destabilization

In Part Two, I referred to stabilization of self as analogous to Ricoeur’s third and fourth senses of *idem*: continuity or permanence over time. Gecas and Mortimer (1987) refer to the

¹⁷ Peter Kreeft, “Lewis’s Philosophy of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty,” in *C.S. Lewis as Philosopher: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty*, eds. David Baggett, Gary R. Habermas, and Jerry L. Walls (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008): 26.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

biographical or existential self as a mental construct that keeps changing over the life of the person; but the changes are a result of the continuing reconstruction of the past, as well as the anticipated future, from the perspective of the present.²⁰ Stabilization of one's sense of self enables the person to more firmly root him or herself in a response to the question, "What am I?"

Memoir writing, then, can be a way of developing the existential self as the memoirist reconstructs the past and anticipates the future, from the perspective of the present. In their discussion of change and stability in the self-concept, Gecas and Mortimer refer to Erik's notion that conflict or dilemma characterizes each stage of the life course, and that the main task during an identity crisis is to crystallize the self-concept and expand it in new directions.²¹ Change in the self-concept is often triggered by conflict of some sort, but the outcome of successfully navigating the conflict should be increased stability in the self-concept.

The memoirists in this study exhibit shifts to their senses of self at different times, in response to a variety of conflicts. Yet, in the end, they appear to emerge with greater stability than instability in their senses of self. The potentially destabilizing effects of anti-transcendent events fail to destabilize their senses of self. Gecas and Mortimer claim that stability is an important feature of existential identity, which tends to agree with Erikson's proposition that crystallization of identity is the central task of adolescence.²² This stabilization of sense of self may have an effect on resilience, in that the person in question is able to "bounce back" to his original state after subsequent anti-transcendent experiences.

²⁰ Viktor Gecas and Jeylan T. Mortimer, "Stability and change in the self-concept from adolescence to adulthood," in Hones, Terry, and Krysia Yardley, eds., *Self and Identity: Perspectives across the lifespan* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987): 267.

²¹ Ibid, 272.

²² E.H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968).

Examples of stabilization or destabilization of self were found in some but not all works in this study. For example, Jefferson traced an evolution of his sense of self through his memoir, which then stabilized to repeated references to himself as both African American and a Tuskegee Airman. McCain and Thorsness described their “breaking points,” and before they could establish meaning for them, their sense of self deteriorated: McCain reduced himself to an animal: “I had been reduced to an animal during this period of beating and torture.”;²³ Thorsness self-identified as a “failure”. Both also stabilized their sense of self when they established meaning to their breaking points. McCain realized that everyone had their breaking point, and he knew he had reached his. Yet after having been given time to rest, he was able to resist and never stopped resisting. In the end, he came to the conclusion that one of the most important things in his life, “along with a man’s family – is to make some contribution to his country.”²⁴ Thorsness, after confessing to his fellow POWs about his breaking point, rejected the self-image of “failure,” reassigning his sense of self to “average,” and was “happy to be so.”²⁵

Extraordinary connections within and beyond, and their contraries

Extraordinary connections within and beyond the self, in space-time, gives the person coordinates in moral space and allows the person to draw from those coordinates in future situations, particularly those that might be morally challenging. In his discussion of the link between one’s sense of identity and orientation, Charles Taylor (1989) states that “to know who you are is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is

²³ McCain, “John McCain, Prisoner of War: A First-Person Account.”

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Thorsness, *Surviving Hell: A POW’s Journey*, 31.

trivial and secondary.”²⁶ He defines an identity crisis as an “acute form of disorientation”²⁷ in that moral space. Taylor identifies three axes of moral thinking, which he claims are universal to humans: a) sense of respect for and obligations to others; b) our understanding of what makes a full life; and c) a notion of human dignity (command of attitudinal respect).²⁸ Although I do not limit these extraordinary connections within and beyond the self to Taylor’s “axes of moral thinking,” they share the same inside/outside notion of extraordinary connectivity. What Taylor does not do, however, is to establish a connection between transcendence and moral space. He came closer to making this connection in 1996, when he said, “Acknowledging the transcendent means being called to a change of identity...it means aiming beyond life, or opening yourself to a change in identity.”²⁹

Coordinates in moral space can be tracked narratively – they are linked to these extraordinary, personally relevant events (positive or negative) for which the person has successfully established meaning. Each memoirist describes these events and how they changed them. Nick Rowe, for example, explicitly refers to the moment he began to believe, “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want,” and refers to it again at one other extraordinary time (just before he escaped with his life).³⁰ Leo Thorsness also recalls the importance of that same line in Psalm 23, telling how he taught the psalm to his fellow prisoners via tap code, so that by the time they were liberated, they all knew it by heart.³¹

²⁶ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989): 28.

²⁷ Ibid, 27.

²⁸ Ibid, 15.

²⁹ Charles Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?” *Modernist Award Lectures: US Catholic Special Collection*, Book 10: 16 – 17, accessed Mar 23, 2017, http://ecommons.udayton.edu/uscc_marianist_award/10/?utm_source=ecommons.udayton.edu%2Fuscc_marianist_award%2F10&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages.

³⁰ Rowe, *Five Years to Freedom*, 227, 405.

³¹ Thorsness, *Surviving Hell: A POW's Journey*, 69.

Racial stereotypes and racism in American culture

America in the early- to mid-twentieth century was a place of racial tensions, including but not limited to tensions between blacks and whites. Gordon Allport (1958) cited a 1934 survey study by Kimball Young, which reported stereotyped beliefs concerning the “Negro.” Stereotypes included: “inferior mentality; primitive morality; emotional instability; overassertiveness; given to crimes of violence with razors and knives; high birth rate threatening to white majority, and lazy and boisterous.”³² On November 10, 1925, Major General H.F. Ely sent a 32-page memo to the Chief of Staff about “Employment of negro man power in war.”³³ Below is the text of the first part of the memo:

2. The negro does not perform his share of civil duties in time of peace in proportion to his population * He has no leaders in Industrial or commercial life* He takes no part in government. Compared to the white man he is admittedly of inferior mentality. He is inherently weak in character.

3. The negro issue should be met squarely. The War Department had no pre-determined and sound plan for the use of negro troops at the beginning of the World War. It had no adequate defense against political and racial pressure and was forced to organize negro combat divisions and commission unqualified negro officers. The results are well known.

I bring these documents to light as examples of the kind of prejudice that was already at work in America, in both governmental institutions and in civil society, all before World War II began. In his section on the prejudiced personality, Allport noted that prejudiced adults exhibited the same tendency as prejudiced children, who tended to bifurcate their thinking. He also noted that those who tended to dichotomize in their cognitive functions were also the very people who accentuated the distinction between in-group and out-group.³⁴

³² Kimball Young, *An Introductory Sociology* (New York: American Book, 1934): 158-163.

³³ “Memorandum for the Chief of Staff: Employment of negro man power in war,” FDR Presidential Library and Museum website, November 10, 1925, accessed Apr 1, 2017, https://fdrlibrary.org/documents/356632/390886/tusk_doc_a.pdf/4693156a-8844-4361-ae17-03407e7a3dee.

³⁴ Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*, 376.

Jefferson recalls in his “Postscript” section how he experienced discrimination growing up and in graduate school, but one event in graduate school highlights this how this type of personality behaves in encounters with the object of his prejudice:³⁵

As an African American, I had, of course, experienced discrimination throughout my life. Often it was covert, but it could also be overt. In graduate school, I had a history professor who literally called me a liar when I wrote a term paper on my experiences as a World War II fighter pilot. He told me that Negroes did not have the intelligence to enter the Air Force and that I had fabricated my story. He also did not believe a Negro could earn an “A” in his class, because we supposedly were incapable of such high-quality work. I proved him wrong, but only after I went to the dean with my term paper along with the results of the tests I had taken in class.

Jefferson’s encounters with racism throughout his life influenced how he told his story, and which extraordinary, personally relevant events he chose with respect to which to establish meaning for himself and in connection with others. Racial tension and identity was infused into his narrative in a way that is absent from the other memoirs. In spite of the setbacks he experienced as a member of an “out-group,” Jefferson’s last words in his memoir reflect how he stabilized his sense of self and made extraordinary connections within and beyond himself: “In the final analysis, the Tuskegee Airmen did make history, and I am so very proud to have been one of them.”³⁶

³⁵ Jefferson, *Red Tail Captured, Red Tail Free*, 120.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 122.

Method: Database design and narrative analysis

Database design

This study was a qualitative, narrative analysis, tracking themes, word usage, and markers for transcendent or anti-transcendent events, time, space, people, sense of self, and connections within and beyond the self. Although the analysis was qualitative (and interpretive) in nature, I did design and populate a database to capture and sort narrative fragments so that I could quickly sort and select different kinds of relevant, extraordinary events (transcendent or anti-transcendent), identify thematic and contextual markers in the text, examine the sequencing of events, and tag “outputs” of transcendence or anti-transcendence. I created a database in Microsoft Access (2016) with two relational tables. The first table, “BIOGRAPHICAL DATA,” contained 14 fields. The second table, “Narrative,” also contained 14 fields and was linked to the BIOGRAPHICAL DATA table via the “Author” field, a drop-down list that connected author information from the first table with narrative fragments captured in the second table.

Table 3.1 provides the field list of the BIOGRAPHICAL DATA table. The primary purpose of this table was to tabulate some details about each memoirist and link records from the memoirists in this table to a second one, called NARRATIVE, which contained the narrative fragments themselves. This relational table structure allowed me to link each record in the NARRATIVE table with the right memoirist using the memoirist’s last name as the bridge.

Table 3.1 BIOGRAPHICAL DATA table field list

Field name	Format	Values
ID	Auto number	Unique record identifier
Last name	Short Text	
First Name	Short Text	
YEAR of BIRTH	Number	
WAR/LOCATION	Drop down list	WWII – Germany; WWII – Japan; Vietnam
BRANCH	Drop down list	AIR FORCE [Tuskegee, Army, or just AIR FORCE]
YEAR OF CAPTURE	Number	
AGE AT CAPTURE	Number	
AGE AT RELEASE	Number	Age of memoirist
YEAR OF MEMOIR	Number	Year published
AGE OF MEMOIR PUB	Number	Used to approximate time elapsed between age of release and age that the story was published
YEAR OF DEATH	Number	Blank if still alive
AGE AT DEATH	Number	Blank if still alive
Still alive?	Yes/no	(At the time of study)

Table 3.2 provides the field list of the “NARRATIVE” table. The “Author” field linked each record in the NARRATIVE table with the relevant author’s record in the BIOGRAPHICAL DATA table, so that sorting of fragments could be done by author when needed. The “Extraordinary event, TRANS markers, and ANTI-Trans markers” fields helped to tag each fragment as transcendent, anti-transcendent, or both, and applied one or more descriptors to the record that gave more information of the characteristic of these events. “Relevance to self” was a long text field that contained a snippet of the narrative fragment illustrating how the memoirist’s description of the event provided context of its self-relevance. “Extraordinary quality” was another long text field that contained a snippet of the narrative fragment that indicated how the event suspended the memoirist’s everyday heuristic. POS2 and NEG2 outcomes were noted as per the kind of outcome in each (see values column in Table 3.2). The entire narrative fragment was contained in the FRAGMENT field. Time period in which the event occurred was noted

with reference to six segments: 1) pre-enlistment; 2) pre-capture (which included training and missions prior to capture); 3) capture (including surrender, if surrendered); 4) POW status (after capture, before 5) release/escape; 6) post-release/escape, including epilogue period in the memoir. The remaining three fields (OTHER PG REFS, theme, COMMENTS) were for my use to cross-tabulate findings more conveniently, while I was sorting fragments for study.

Table 3.2 NARRATIVE table field list

Field name	Format	Values
ID	Auto number	Unique record identifier
Author	Drop down list	Selected from BIOGRAPHICAL DATA: ID, Last name, WAR/LOCATION, BRANCH, AGE AT CAPTURE, AGE AT RELEASE, AGE OF MEMOIR PUBLICATION
Extraordinary event	Check list [multiple values possible]	Transcendent, Anti-transcendent
TRANS markers	Check list [multiple values possible]	Good, True, Beautiful
ANTI-Trans markers	Check list [multiple values possible]	Bad, False, Ugly
Relevance to self	Long text	Narrative fragment demonstrating self-relevance
Extraordinary quality	Long text	Narrative fragment describing extraordinary markers (TRANS or ANTI-Trans)
POS2 outcome	Check list [multiple values possible]	Stabilize SELF; Extraordinary connections [WITHIN, BEYOND]; None
NEG2 outcome	Check list [multiple values possible]	Destabilize SELF; Disintegrate/sever connection [WITHIN, BEYOND]; None
FRAGMENT	Long text	The narrative fragment that describes the extraordinary event and processing
Time period	Check list [multiple values possible]	Pre-enlistment; Pre-capture; Capture; POW status; Release/escape; Post-release/escape
OTHER PG REFS	Short Text	Other pgs. where the event is referenced
Theme	Short Text	General theme of the fragment
COMMENTS	Long text	Additional comments on the fragment to aid the analysis

Narrative analysis

I did not analyze all transcendent or anti-transcendent events in each text. Rather, I analyzed narrative fragments that offered textual evidence that: a) the “everyday” heuristic was suspended; b) where the memoirist explicitly attempted to establish meaning to the transcendent or anti-transcendent event; and c) when an outcome that was mentioned or implied in the text. The “input” here is the extraordinary, personally relevant event that suspends the person’s everyday heuristic. I propose that there are at least two outcomes (“outputs”) of transcendence as an experiential process, whereby meaning is successfully established regarding significant, personally relevant events, both positive and negative. The first – stabilization of one’s sense of self, enables the person to root himself or herself more firmly in a response to the question, “What am I?” The second outcome, extraordinary connections within and beyond the self, in space-time, gives the person coordinates in moral space. These coordinates allow the person to draw from those coordinates in future situations, particularly those that might be morally challenging.

Analysis of the fragments was normally done in the order presented, without disrupting their sequence, but removing textual bulk from some of the narratives to sharpen the focus on the process. The reason I preserved the sequence of the fragments was to determine if there was a structure underlying how they were presented. The exception to this rule of analysis occurs in Nick Rowe’s memoir, in which key poems written at three different time periods were analyzed in a separate section.

Tracking inputs

An “input” to transcendence as meaning-making process is an event that passed three phase gates in my model prior to attempting to establish meaning (Fig. 1 in Part II). The event had to be relevant to the memoirist (relevant to self), extraordinary (not “everyday”, and either positive or negative), and suspend the memoirist’s everyday heuristic. Before I could determine whether the everyday heuristic was suspended, I had to establish a baseline for the everyday, and this was done for each memoirist separately, because each of them framed his “everyday” experiences differently. While there were similarities in what was part of the everyday (e.g., disease, hunger, physical abuse, death, filth), the different memoirists had particular ways of characterizing their experiences of the everyday.

Events that deviated from these norms did not always necessarily suspend their everyday heuristic, but when they did, the prose reflected it and could be tracked. For example, when Biggs noticed the beauty of the moonlight while crossing the Yangtze River, he not only described it as “as beautiful as any I had ever seen,” but confirmed this event as extraordinary by affirming that “several men commented on it.”³⁷ Another example in which an event suspended the memoirist’s everyday heuristic is when Zincke came across a grove of cherry trees, and he “forgot the hated word “war” and our lowly state as prisoners of war. A feeling of being near God swept over me, and I fell into a restful sleep for an hour or so.”³⁸

³⁷ Biggs, Jr., *Behind the Barbed Wire: Memoir of a World War II US Marine Captured in North China in 1941 and Imprisoned by the Japanese until 1945*, 81.

³⁸ Zincke, *Mitsui Madhouse: Memoir of a US Army Air Corps POW in World War II*, 145.

Tracking outputs

The potential “outputs” of transcendence include stabilization of one’s sense of self and the making of extraordinary connections within and beyond the self. As I mentioned earlier, stabilization of one’s sense of self would be reflected in more consistent, reliable processes of reflection on experiences that deepen interior understanding, in such a way that self is perceived as “a unified, singular, whole.”³⁹ The second kind of outcome, extraordinary connections within and beyond the self, in space-time, gives the person coordinates in moral space, and allows the person to draw from those coordinates in future situations, particularly those that might be morally challenging. To elaborate, the extraordinary, personally relevant event to which a person attaches meaning, will be situated in a particular place and time. If the outcome of that meaning-making is an extraordinary connection within or beyond the self, i.e., something that resonates strongly interiorly or a person or place that symbolizes that meaning-making process, the person will draw from that connection in future situations bearing similar trappings of moral hazard. An example is when Nick Rowe attached meaning to Dave’s death and tagged it with Psalm 23. That same psalm was referenced just before he made his escape, close to the end of his memoir.

Sometimes stabilization of one’s sense of self enabled the memoirist to more firmly root himself in a response to the question, “What am I?” For Jefferson, his sense of self stabilized in two ways: as an African American and as an American Tuskegee Airman. In McCain’s case, *destabilization* of his sense of self occurred at his “breaking point,” when he succumbed to the torture. At that moment, he was reduced to “an animal.”⁴⁰ Stabilization of one’s sense of self was one of two possible types of outcomes, and it was not necessarily found in every memoir.

³⁹ Thoits, “Self, Identity, Stress, and Mental Health,” 357.

⁴⁰ McCain, “John McCain, Prisoner of War: A First-Person Account.”

The other type of outcome, extraordinary connections within and beyond the self, enabled the memoirist to plot coordinates in moral space. For example, Gordon recalled when an American named Bill Standish saved him from dying in the mountain snow. He not only expressed his gratefulness to Bill over the years, but concluded that memory with a coordinate in moral space: “Exceptional men like him must never be forgotten.”⁴¹ Zincke, when he connected with the Japanese family shortly after liberation, felt “the deepest sympathy for them” – an emotion establishing extraordinary ties beyond himself – but also ended that account with a deep moral question signaling the establishment of an extraordinary connection within himself, resulting in setting coordinates in moral space: “Why must so many suffer for the greed and ambition of so few?”⁴² He appears to have later referred to these very coordinates when he took part in a class-action lawsuit against several large Japanese companies that profited from their forced labor during the war.

Challenges

A challenge of exegeting eight different memoirs by eight different authors is the need to adjust the exegetical approaches and filters for language usage (repetitions, expressions, emphasis) for each work. Although initially I studied word and thematic repetitions within and across works, the contours of transcendence (and anti-transcendence) were distinctive and particular to each author. While the “components” of my theory were evident in all the works, each instance was uniquely marked by the memoirist’s style of narration and personality. Generalizing one person’s “black box” of meaning-making to another was not a valid approach. However, it was possible to identify commonalities between memoirists: each identified what I

⁴¹ Gordon, *Horyo: Memoirs of an American POW*, 143.

⁴² Zincke, *Mitsui Madhouse: Memoir of a US Army Air Corps POW in World War II*, 159.

tagged as “transcendent” and “anti-transcendent” events, each used their narratives to attempt to attach meaning to certain ones, and each exhibited personal “outputs” of transcendence when it occurred. My analysis, while finding these commonalities, could not validly impose one author’s “black box” to another person’s narrative in order to trace transcendence as a meaning-making process.

Another challenge was selecting passages that contained elements of input, meaning-making, and output of transcendence (or anti-transcendence) such that I could exegete them in a way that confirmed or disconfirmed this model of meaning-making. Many of the fragments had descriptions of inputs and the beginnings of meaning-making, but then failed to provide any insight as to whether that meaning-making was successful, have any impact on the memoirist’s sense of self, or make extraordinary connections within and/or beyond himself. I included an example of some anomalous passages in my analysis of Jefferson’s account of what he encountered at the Dachau camp.

Finally, the memoirs varied greatly in length and structure, from McCain’s very brief account (12,500 words) to Rowe’s rather lengthy one (about 186,000 words), and from Zincke’s chronologically ordered account (by date) to Thorsness’ thematically organized account, which went back and forth between different time periods. Thorsness’ organization of his memoir had an added layer of meaning according to how he organized his narrative (topics like “What I brought with me,” or “A day in the life,” or “Leaving Hell”), while Rowe’s meaning-making was often found nested deeply in the text, within chapters that were neither numbered in a table of contents nor titled with a thematic tag.

The next section will begin my analysis of the memoirs, beginning with the memoirists of POW experiences of World War II (prisoners of Germany and Japan) and continuing with the POW memoirists of the Vietnam War.

World War II Memoirs: Germany

This section will track transcendence and its inputs and outputs for two memoirists: Ralph E. Sirianni, Jr., and Alexander Jefferson. Given the stark differences in their reported experiences, the memoirists appeared to be immersed in very different contexts. Sirianni's loss of freedom, for example, became something of an existential crisis, while Jefferson simply accepted it as something to be "sat out". Jefferson's experience of racism, as another example, distinctively influenced how he established meaning for a variety of events, transcendent and anti-transcendent.

I have divided this section into three parts. The first part examines Sirianni's memoir, establishing a baseline of the "everyday" experience and looking at events around two themes: his freedom (as lost or regained), and post-traumatic stress. Meaning-making was evident in both themes, and I learned from Sirianni's memoir that resilience does not necessarily equal immunity to post-traumatic stress (PTS). However, he was able to overcome the PTS symptoms in the end, when he chose two methods of meaning-making that reestablished extraordinary connections within and beyond himself and had therapeutic effects.

The second part examines Jefferson's memoir, again establishing a baseline of the "everyday" for him and examining events around two themes: racism and his evolving sense of self. These themes influenced how he established meaning for some events and not others. Jefferson's memoir does have an anomalous fragment which appears to disclose a particularly traumatic experience, but offers no trace of meaning-making (success or failure) and no mention of ill effects later. However, there are several other cases of meaning-making that he documents which do align with my proposed model of transcendence, and inputs and outputs are identifiable in those cases.

The last section compares the two memoirist's experiences, meaning-making processes, and thematic backdrops or space-time canvases on which extraordinary, personally relevant, positive and negative experiences are recorded and processed. Sirianni's meaning-making occurs in a different way from Jefferson's, in that Sirianni notes that telling his story and getting the help of a psychologist were the two decisions that he made to resolve his crisis of meaning, while Jefferson appears to establish meaning via his later service in different venues.

Ralph E. Sirianni, Jr.

Ralph Sirianni was shot down on his seventh mission, two weeks after his first mission. He had only been enlisted just over one year when captured, at the age of twenty years old. He spent 15 months in *Stalag Luft* before the camp was liberated by the "Cossacks" (Russians), and exhibited signs of post-traumatic stress almost as soon as he was released,⁴³ but did not talk to his family about it. Adjusting to being back home was a challenge for him, as he noticed that he kept relating everything he did and saw to his experience at the camp.⁴⁴ However, in his concluding chapter, he shares how he moved towards healing. He made two decisions: first, he decided to tell his story to his family and friends; and second, he sought professional help from a psychologist.

After establishing a baseline of the everyday for Sirianni's memoir, this section will examine two sets of narrative fragments. The first set will follow Sirianni's focus on freedom, his loss of freedom, and the church and steeple just outside the camp which became a symbol of freedom for him. The second set will follow his meaning-making challenges in the midst of his post-traumatic stress symptoms, which he noticed shortly after his liberation.

⁴³ Sirianni, *POW #3959: Memoir of a World War II Airman Shot Down over Germany*, 139.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 142.

The “Everyday”

Like many of his fellow memoirists here, Sirianni noted aspects of life as a POW that he eventually accepted as part of his everyday existence, which were likely incorporated into his “everyday heuristic.” I selected three instances of Sirianni’s everyday baseline to discuss here: a) “maggot soup”; b) the daily routine at the camp; and c) the use of vulgar language.

In the first three months of his time at *Stalag Luft I*, Sirianni identified some “everyday” realities. The food was often not fresh, and sometimes contained parasites, like maggots. Bread, soup, and occasionally cheese, were given to the prisoners to split up between them.⁴⁵ Sirianni described their first day there, when they discovered maggots in their soup. Initially refusing to eat the soup, two prisoners visiting from another room assure them that the maggots are well-cooked, dead, and unlikely to kill them or make them sick.⁴⁶ After getting over the initial shock, he notes how they were able to accept the “normalcy” of maggots in their soup:⁴⁷

In a strange way, our visitors had been right. No one got sick or died, and within a week we all ate the soup, maggots or no maggots. The maggots were very big and had two tails. One of the men named them “P-38s.” A P-38 was one of our fighter planes with twin tails. We got used to this kind of soup, and no one complained again. In fact, no one even discussed the maggots in the barley soup. Later we learned that the food in the German storehouse was often kept there for so long that the barley became infested with maggots. But this did not prevent the Germans from giving the barley soup to us.

He learned that when close to starving, people would eat anything. They ate the soup with maggots, bread with sawdust, “and whatever other horrible concoctions the Germans gave us.”⁴⁸ Getting any food was something that they were glad to receive.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 93 – 95.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 92 – 93.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 93.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Punishment by the Germans included forcing the prisoners to stand outside all day without access to the barracks, as well as solitary confinement, starvation, and beatings. Early in his captivity, Sirianni noted how they adapted to German expectations:⁴⁹

We began to understand what the Germans expected of us, and the men tried to comply with their rules to avoid any punishment. We even got used to the roll call when the Germans counted us every morning and night, and we got adjusted to being locked in every night... Whenever the Germans got angry with us, it always resulted in some kind of punishment.

The use of vulgar language was not noted as part of the “everyday” reality of the prisoners until after he was released and found himself slipping into that language with his family. Vulgar language served as a conduit for the strong emotions that the POWs carried within, as well as an outlet for tension. He recalled when they were going home how things would need to change, including the use of vulgar language:⁵⁰

Now that we were actually on our way home, we began to openly talk about how it would feel to be back with our family and friends. In the camp we had to struggle to survive. We came face to face with punishment and death every day, and we saw men die from starvation and illness. It was a rough life, and because of our feelings of anger and hatred at being locked up, vulgar language became a strong part of our daily life. This was something we did not wish to continue in our civilian life. I had been away from normal society for so long, I had a fear of not being able to readjust to civilian life.

Sirianni noticed how vulgar language, while a helpful conduit or outlet for the strong emotions experienced while imprisoned, would no longer be useful in civilian life. Yet it became so ingrained as a habit that the profanities would come out almost unconsciously, as Sirianni noticed, to his own chagrin.

The appalling condition of the food, the constant threat of punishment, and the use of vulgar language as a way of coping are three examples of the kind of things that were eventually processed with an “everyday heuristic” – i.e., not deeply processed or meaningful. Other things

⁴⁹ Ibid, 98.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 133, 141.

did suspend Sirianni's everyday heuristic, including (but not limited to) his loss of freedom, symbols of freedom, and the pain and suffering he endured while being held in Germany.

Freedom lost – an existential crisis

Sirianni recalled the first three months at *Stalag Luft I* in Chapter 7 of his memoir, highlighting the loss of freedom as an existential crisis, and questioning whether he could survive his imprisonment. He recalled shortly after he was shot down how he had taken his freedom and home comforts “for granted,” perhaps having relegated them to his everyday heuristic back then. Suddenly freedom (and the loss of it) became an extraordinary event or reality, which Sirianni notes in his chapter on the first three months at the *Stalag Luft I* facility:⁵¹

I believed that I could survive the lack of some of the amenities, but could I survive the loss of my freedom? Looking around the prisoner of war camp, it suddenly hit me. Not only was I a prisoner, but also I had no control over whether I lived or died. I swore to myself then and there, that if I ever got out of this German camp, I would never again take my freedom for granted. Losing your dignity is degrading. Losing your freedom is devastating. Sometimes a person has to lose something in order to appreciate it even more.

The only thing that helped me keep my courage up was that I could draw on the strength of the other captured airmen, and we could draw on each others' strength. All of us had learned that the only way to survive this war was to help each other. During our time as crewmembers in our B-17s, we had developed a strong sense of unity. Now, as POWs, we had to maintain that same sense of unity. If we didn't, we would not survive.

One could say that his sudden loss of freedom was an extraordinary, personally relevant, anti-transcendent event – the kind with the capacity to destabilize his sense of self and/or disintegrate extraordinary connections within and beyond himself. Yet, in the same passage, he recalls many years later how he transcended this experience of captivity: “I could draw on the strength of the other captured airmen, and we could draw on each other's strength.” In other words, they developed extraordinary ties with each other. Perhaps this bonding was part of the meaning-

⁵¹ Ibid, 86.

making that enabled them not only to survive, but to develop extraordinary friendships that would last a lifetime.

Freedom regained: the church, steeple, and arch

When they were liberated, Sirianni recalls the walk to the planes that were waiting to carry them home. A church that was outside the camp became a symbol of freedom for those inside the camp during their captivity. At three different places in the memoir, Sirianni recalls the significance of that church with its steeple and arch – once at liberation, and twice when he returned forty years later to visit with his wife. I will discuss each fragment in this section and how the events surrounding Sirianni glimpsing this church at different points in time carried the attributes of being extraordinary, personally significant, and transcendent in nature, helping to establish extraordinary ties within and beyond himself.

The first narrative fragment describes the moment that he walked to the planes that would carry him homeward:⁵²

Finally it was my turn to go to the planes. I picked up my gear and, after fifteen long, horrible, frightening months, I walked out of the camp without looking back. We were led through the town of Barth, but there were no longer German guards to watch us, and no German civilians to attack us. We passed by the same railroad station where we had entered Barth. There were boxcars on the rails just like when we had arrived so long ago.

As we walked toward the church, I looked up at the steeple that we had seen every day from the camp. While in the camp, that church steeple outside the camp seemed to be a symbol of freedom, and it felt good to finally be passing the steeple on our way home. We continued down the narrow street toward the arch under the church.

In this narrative fragment, a single glance at the building that he had daily noticed from a distance as a prisoner becomes extraordinary (“that church steeple outside the camp seemed to be a symbol of freedom, and it felt good to finally be passing the steeple on our way home”). His

⁵² Ibid, 133.

prisoner's everyday heuristic was suspended in that walk of freedom. Sirianni does not indicate any "outputs" from the meaning of this transcendent event until much later in the memoir, when he recalls visiting the church forty years later:⁵³

As the buses approached Barth, the first thing I saw was the church steeple, the same church steeple that I had seen every day when I looked outside the camp. Because this church steeple was outside Stalag Luft I, it had become a symbol of freedom for me and the other airmen while we were prisoners in the camp. When I got off the bus in front of the town hall, I looked around at the other men, who were also staring at the steeple. Some of them were quietly explaining to their wives what the steeple had meant to us. It was easy to see that they were experiencing the same emotional turmoil that I was.

The "emotional turmoil" Sirianni mentions here suggests that the event of glancing at the church steeple again suspends his everyday heuristic, and he acknowledges that both he and his fellow former POWs were still significantly moved by the experience. Meaning is affirmed for the vision of this building, from "seeming" to be (while in the camp) to "becoming" (after liberation) a symbol of freedom. Extraordinary ties are identified/established within and beyond himself, in time and space, as he explains a few paragraphs later:⁵⁴

After lunch, people from the tour went in all different directions around the town. Mary and I headed straight for the church. I just stood there looking at it for a few minutes. People would not be able to imagine how important this church and its steeple had been to me for fourteen months of captivity. Further down from the church was a huge arch over the road. The columns were on each side of the road and joined together above the road. It was like an entrance to the town. I wanted to walk through this arch again. When we were liberated, we walked through the arch to the airfield farther down the road, where we boarded the B-17s as free men. I can't even begin to explain how emotional it was for me to see this church close up and to be walking through the arch again.

Sirianni's extraordinary connection with the church as a symbol of freedom is made clear by the intense emotional reaction to seeing it again. Walking through the arch again reinforced the extraordinary connection he had with the church as symbol of freedom. Earlier in his narrative, around the time that he was captured, he talked about the loss of freedom as an existential crisis

⁵³ Ibid, 164.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 165.

(“could I survive the loss of my freedom?”). His freedom, once regained, was extraordinarily connected with seeing this church and its steeple and arch in a way that gave meaning to the event. Sirianni had established meaning for his capture, POW experience, and freedom regained, as he bonded with fellow airmen and looked often at the sign of freedom (the church) from his place of imprisonment.

Resilience may not equal immunity to post-traumatic stress

Rebounding from adverse experiences is a definition of resilience that is also recognized in the military literature. Simmons and Yoder (2013) used Bonanno et al’s (2006) definition of resilience: “the ability to adapt to adversity or to rebound from adverse situations.”⁵⁵ They also posit that consequences of high resilience include “decreased mental health symptoms and career and personal success, especially when placed in stressful situations.”⁵⁶ Additionally, they propose that consequences of low resilience include “increased risk for mental illness, such as anxiety, depression, PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), and suicidal ideations.”⁵⁷

According to the *Desk Reference to the Diagnostic Criteria from DSM-5* (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition) regarding PTSD, criteria include: a) exposure to actual or threatened death or serious injury; b) presence of one or more intrusion symptoms associated with the traumatic event(s), beginning after the traumatic event occurred; c) persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the traumatic event(s); d) negative alterations in cognitions and mood associated with the traumatic event(s); e) sleep disturbance; and f) duration of the

⁵⁵ Bonanno, G., Galea, S., Bucciarelli, A., & Vlahov, D., “Psychological resilience after disaster,” *Psychological Science*, 17 (2006): 181–186.

⁵⁶ Angela Simmons, PhD, RN, and Linda Yoder, RN, MBA, PhD, AOCN, FAAN, “Military Resilience: A Concept Analysis,” *Nursing Forum* 48:1 (Jan – Mar 2013): 21.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

disturbance longer than one month.⁵⁸ Intrusive symptoms include “recurrent, involuntary, and intrusive distressing memories of the traumatic events; recurrent distressing dreams in which the content and/or affect of the dream are related to the traumatic event(s).” Avoidance includes “efforts to avoid distressing memories, thoughts, or feelings about or closely associated with the traumatic events.”⁵⁹ Negative alterations in cognitions or mood include “persistent negative emotional state...feelings of detachment or estrangement from others.”⁶⁰ The narrative fragments below demonstrate remarkable similarities between Sirianni’s descriptions of his symptoms and those listed under PTSD in the DSM-5.

While high resilience may include decreased mental health symptoms, as Simmons and Yoder posit, it may not necessarily equal complete immunity from post-traumatic stress (PTS). Sirianni noticed and reflected on symptoms that appear consistent with PTSD, commenting on them towards the end of his memoir, especially following anniversary visits to the *Stalag Luft* sites. In his final chapter, he notes, “Sometimes the memories of the war came flooding back into my mind and upset me. I had been hoping that the previous reunions and the finding of the site where our plane had crashed would enable me to face the past and move on to enjoy my retirement.”⁶¹ He realized, however, “that the experience of being a POW never goes away,”⁶² even with the euphoria from the reunions and finding the original crash site. In fact, he started having nightmares and flashbacks within the time of his most recent reunions, between 1993 and

⁵⁸ American Psychiatric Association, *Desk Reference to the Diagnostic Criteria from DSM-5* (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013): 143 – 145.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 144.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 145.

⁶¹ Sirianni, *POW #3959: Memoir of a World War II Airman Shot Down over Germany*, 191.

⁶² Ibid, 193.

1998. He wanted to talk more about his time in *Stalag Luft I*, and although he wanted to make sense of these symptoms, initially he could not:⁶³

At the time of this trip, 1998, fifty-four years had gone by since I had been a prisoner of war. But I was soon to find out that the experience of being a POW never goes away. Sometimes it was shunted aside in my memory, but as the years went by, the horror of being a prisoner of war kept coming back in my dreams and in my mind. I understood now, after the trip to Germany, that you couldn't forget, no matter how hard you try. You could not blot out the horror from your life. Those memories will always be with me.

Many POWs must have had some of the same flashbacks and disturbing memories recurring in their lives just as I have. It surprised me to have everything come back to me so late in my life. I did not have these nightmares earlier in my life after my discharge from the Army Air Corps. Maybe the flashbacks did not occur earlier because I was so glad to be home and so busy finding a job, getting married, and raising children and grandchildren. Gradually I began to have occasional glimpses of the bad times at the German camp, but I was able to suppress them and continue on with my life.

But a few years ago the bad dreams and memories of the cruelty at the camp came back time and time again. Sometimes I woke up in fear after a bad dream about being back in the camp. It was almost as if I was really back in the prisoner of war camp. Night after night my dreams sent me back to the camp. I dreamed of the terror of being shot down and captured by the Germans. The brutal treatment of the airmen came back to me in my dreams, and I saw the men dying one by one. My wife said that while I was still asleep, I would thrash about in the bed. I knew I had to do something about these continuing nightmares because they were getting worse and more frequent. But I did not know what to do.

Healing begins with meaning-making

Suppressing the memories was not a permanent solution. He could only guess why the flashbacks did not happen earlier, but it is possible that the onset of a different phase in his life (retirement) triggered the flashbacks. Now he wanted to “get everything out” in the open:⁶⁴

But I knew one thing for sure now. I no longer wanted to suppress my wartime experiences. I wanted to end the horrible dreams. I had never talked about my time in the camp to my family or friends, but now I needed to get everything out in the open. Then maybe the bad dreams would stop. I made two major decisions. First I decided that I wanted to tell my story to my family so they could understand what I had been through. Then maybe they could understand what I was going through now.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 195 – 196.

My second decision was to seek the help of a psychologist who would help me understand these flashbacks and memories. One way to tell my story was to write a book about my wartime experiences, but I had never written a book before. I contacted a friend, Pat Brown, who had already published a book, as well as some articles. She agreed that I had a story that needed to be told. Together we wrote this book. Telling my story and getting it out in the open has been very beneficial to me. My family now knows the whole story that I had kept bottled up inside me for many years. The bad dreams have not completely stopped, but they do not occur as often. Hopefully, someday they will disappear altogether.

Sirianni's desire to share his experiences with his family and to address his disturbing symptoms resulted in two decisions that he says were very beneficial to him. The first decision was to tell his story, and the second was to get psychological help. He chose to tell his story by writing about it, and it resulted in at least two outcomes.

The first outcome was that he was able to reestablish extraordinary ties with his family and friends. Secondly, his sleep disturbances were reduced. There may have been other benefits but the author makes no mention of them in the memoir. This first decision for Sirianni, to tell his story, began his healing process as he established meaning for his experience as a prisoner of war. His second decision, to seek psychological help, would help him to deepen the meaning-making, helping him to "understand these flashbacks and memories." While resilience may not necessarily equal immunity to PTS, perhaps Sirianni's previous hardship as a POW enabled him to carry on until he was able to establish meaning for his experiences in Germany.

Conclusion

Sirianni's baseline of the "everyday" while a prisoner in Germany during World War II included filth, disease, threats and physical punishment, and the lack of electricity. Three instances of his "everyday" experiences were highlighted here: the maggot soup, the daily routine at the camp, and the use of vulgar language as a way of coping.

Extraordinary events that suspended his everyday heuristic included the loss and regaining of his freedom. Years later, revisiting the camp with his wife also triggered meaning-making for Sirianni, which established extraordinary connections within and beyond himself in space and time. For example, the church and its steeple and arch, visible from his captive moments, became a symbol of freedom that deepened his appreciation of it when he was liberated. The others, he noted, developed similarly extraordinary connections with that symbol.

Meaning-making may not happen immediately after the transcendent or anti-transcendent event occurs. In Sirianni's case, it took half a century, and only after he became aware of adverse symptoms that he could not control, like those associated with post-traumatic stress. We also learned from Sirianni's memoir that resilience does not necessarily equal immunity to PTS, and might have been thought. Although he was able to rebound from the experience, get married, serve as a police officer, then as a Winthrop Board of Health Inspector, and later as a Democratic state representative from Winthrop for five terms, he still suffered from PTS symptoms later in life.

In Sirianni's case, two approaches to meaning-making were taken: a) telling his story; and b) psychological help. Using memoir writing as his medium to tell his story, he said that "telling my story and getting it out in the open has been very beneficial to me. My family now knows the whole story that I had kept bottled up for many years."⁶⁵ The outcomes of this meaning-making included reestablishing extraordinary ties with his family and friends, and improvement of his PTS symptoms.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 196.

Alexander Jefferson

Alexander Jefferson began his military career in September 1942 as a US Army Reservist, and was activated in April 1943 to begin flight training and eventually serve overseas. Unlike Sirianni, who left high school to enlist, Jefferson was an officer who had completed college at the time of his activation. He was in service for almost two years but only activated for just over a year when he was shot down and captured in August 1944. His captivity took place in *Dulag Luft*, *Stalag Luft III*, and *Stalag VIIA* until April 29, 1945, or a total of eight months, about half of the time that Sirianni spent imprisoned, which was fifteen months.

Jefferson's memoir is different from the other memoirs in that overall, he seemed less adversely affected by his captivity than the others, during his imprisonment and after release. He was more affected by how he was treated as a black airman, during captivity and after his release. Although he witnessed some serious atrocities, he did not provide evidence in his text of meaning-making of a number of these events, nor did he express ill-effects afterwards. This section will provide examples of the "everyday" for Jefferson, and then examine his treatment of extraordinary, personally relevant events during captivity and after his release. It will also discuss several passages that appear to outline his meaning-making and transcendent outcomes, all of which were given at the end of his memoir.

The "Everyday"

Jefferson's experience of captivity was marked by an unusual lack of fear at the *Stalag Luft III*, where he spent five of his eight months in captivity: "The craziest thing about my five months in Stalag Luft III was that I was never really scared. Maybe I was too dumb to be scared, but somehow I psychologically understood that I was just going to have to sit out my

captivity.”⁶⁶ He said, “I tried to look on my captivity as just one among many extraordinary experiences.”⁶⁷ The prison camp that Jefferson went to was very different from Sirianni’s camp: they had a library,⁶⁸ could keep the soaps they received in their Red Cross parcels and stay “relatively clean,”⁶⁹ and were also supplied with paper, pencils, pen, and ink.

One of Jefferson’s “everyday” experiences there was boredom. They learned to pass the time with the games and sporting equipment they received, and Jefferson “drew lots of pictures to keep from being bored.”⁷⁰ Sleep, he said, was both a popular pastime and “a mixed blessing,” depending on what you dreamed of: “It was wonderful when you dreamed of all the good times you were planning to enjoy when you got back home, but more often sleep resulted in nightmares about the horrors of combat, including casualties, captivity, and death.”⁷¹

Regarding any sense of daily fear while at *Stalag Luft III*, where he spent a bulk of his captivity, as mentioned above, he did not experience it. He also made no mention of racist treatment at the camp by his fellow POWs, although he did hear rumors that the Germans considered Blacks to be “apes and all kinds of other stereotypes.”⁷² They encountered racism in Italy, but he said that they later found “that was mostly due to white American soldiers telling the Italians terrible things about us.”⁷³

Daily conditions changed when the Russians advanced in January 1945, and the Luftwaffe officers in charge ordered the transfer of the airmen to *Stalag VIIA*. Conditions at this second camp more closely reflected the conditions that Sirianni described in his memoir:

⁶⁶ Jefferson. *Red Tail Captured, Red Tail Free*, 85.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 64.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 76.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 74.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid, 85.

⁷² Ibid, 59.

⁷³ Ibid.

insufficient housing; poor sanitary conditions; infestations of bed bugs, fleas, and other vermin; overflowing pit toilets; diarrhea; hunger; lack of heat and medical care.⁷⁴

Early greetings at Stalag Luft III: “You’re a Red Tail!”

When Jefferson arrived at *Stalag Luft III*, he learned that there were twelve Tuskegee Airmen there. Tuskegee Airmen, he said, “were held in higher esteem. We were also a bit older and more mature. All of us were college graduates, although some of the white pilots were not.”⁷⁵ He addressed the racism question in the passage below:

Did I experience any overt racism or general resentment on the part of the white POWs? Understandably, I felt an undercurrent of hesitancy and a kind of guarded inquisitiveness. Some of these men had been prisoners for more than two years and had no idea that blacks were now pilots and officers in the Army Air Corps. This was very strange to them, but then one day a B-17 crewmember arrived in Stalag Luft III. When he spotted me, he ran over, grabbed and hugged me, and exclaimed, “You’re a Red Tail! You goddamn Red Tails are the best damned unit! If the Red Tails had been with us, we’d have made it back home! You guys saved our asses so many times!” After that encounter, the reputation of the 332nd Fighter Group spread quickly throughout the camp.

Although on the surface this event may seem very positive to the reader, Jefferson did not attach personal meaning to it in his memoir. The very next sentence after this recollection was about how the camp was organized. I posit that this event was neither everyday nor transcendent or anti-transcendent, in that it was not depicted as extraordinarily and personally positive, nor was it depicted as extraordinarily and personally negative. Yet, as Jefferson indicates, prior to their recognition of him as a Red Tail, he consciously noted an “undercurrent of hesitancy and a kind of guarded inquisitiveness,” so the event was also not automatically routed to his everyday heuristic.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 101 – 102.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 76.

I have included this narrative fragment and the next one because they are idiosyncratic and unique to Jefferson. The events were self-relevant, extraordinary, and appeared to suspend his everyday heuristic, but no mention was made of whether he attempted to make meaning or failed to make meaning of these events.

“The ovens were still warm when we entered Dachau”

A few days after *Stalag VIIA* was liberated, Jefferson hitched a ride and followed the American forces to Dachau. His reason: “I had heard there were a lot of dead bodies down the road, and I wanted to find out what that was all about.”⁷⁶ He describes what he found:⁷⁷

As we got closer to Dachau, I detected a nauseating odor, in the same way you can smell a barbecue on a warm summer day. Of course, this was the sickening smell of burned human flesh. The ovens were still warm when we entered Dachau.

The Dachau barracks were indescribable. There were thousands of striped clothed skeletons lying on bunks or just milling around, and their sunken, hollow, vacant eyes still haunt me. Elsewhere, we found tables piled high with human hair and dental fixtures. There were corpses everywhere. Not surprisingly, I got violently ill.

A bulldozer gouged out a trench approximately two hundred feet long by twenty feet wide. The former German guards were then forced to throw in the dead bodies, many of which were in various states of decay. Next, they spread lime over the corpses and covered them with dirt. I can tell you, whatever has been said or printed about Dachau, no one can fully or adequately describe what we found there.

He abruptly moves on with the narrative, describing the trip from Moosburg to Landshut, where they caught a plane to Verdun. One could argue that his discovery at Dachau was personally relevant in that it answered his question about the dead bodies; that it was anti-transcendent, in that it was extraordinarily negative. It is also clear that his everyday heuristic was suspended (“The Dachau barracks were indescribable...I got violently ill.”). However, Jefferson gives no textual evidence of attempting to establish meaning of this event beyond being

⁷⁶ Ibid, 105.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

“haunted”. He also exhibits no trace of ill effects from the experience elsewhere in the memoir, other than that their “sunken, hollow, vacant eyes still haunt me.” It is impossible to say how he did or did not establish meaning for this event. This does not mean that there was no meaning making. It was simply not possible to track any consequences of this sense of being haunted that connected to his sense of self or his extraordinary ties within and beyond himself.

If he did not, I cannot provide evidence to that effect. This was one of those anomalous fragments that did not appear to conform to the model that I propose regarding transcendence. However, it should also be noted that Jefferson left much unsaid about his experience at Dachau.

Anti-transcendent homecoming: “Whites to the right, niggers to the left”

Jefferson often recalls his experiences of racism, from pre-enlistment years through his military service and beyond retirement. He identified one extraordinary experience that carried both transcendent and anti-transcendent qualities: his homecoming after the war, when he felt the jubilation of returning home and the discouraging treatment of a racist, white, lower ranked soldier:⁷⁸

We steamed into New York on June 7. The ship’s horns were blasting and all of us were shouting at the top of our lungs. Spirits soared when the skyline of New York came into focus, and rose even higher when we spotted the Statue of Liberty and finally docked. What a feeling of indescribable jubilation! But then, going down the gangplank, a short, smug, white buck private shouted, “Whites to the right, niggers to the left.” It was very discouraging, upon returning to the United States, to find racism, segregation, and other social ills alive and well. I knew then I was back home.

Although he was discouraged by the private’s treatment, he already established meaning for this event: “I knew then I was back home.” Establishing meaning for Jefferson does not always

⁷⁸ Ibid, 106 – 107.

translate into establishing positive or rosy meaning to something negative. It may simply be an affirmation of the return to a familiar landscape, as was the case here.

Meaning-making after the war

Much of Jefferson's personal meaning-making is recorded in the last two chapters of his memoir (Chapter 8: "Civilian!" and "Postscript"). They also reflect positive outcomes of transcendence as a meaning-making process: a) stabilization of his sense of self, both as an African American and Tuskegee Airman; b) extraordinary connections within and beyond himself, in space and time, such as pride at his accomplishments, connections with fellow Tuskegee Airmen, and influence in the civil rights movement in America.

"One of my proudest postwar accomplishments"

Jefferson repeatedly referred to himself as an American Tuskegee Airman – this sense of self developed deeper levels of stabilization when he connected with other fellow Tuskegee Airmen after the war. He describes one of his proudest postwar accomplishments, an event which established the Detroit chapter (and later the national organization) of the Tuskegee Airmen and later more chapters around the world:⁷⁹

One of my proudest postwar accomplishments was helping establish the Detroit chapter and later the national organization of Tuskegee Airmen...On July 12, 1972, we held the first organizational meeting of the Detroit Chapter of the Tuskegee Airmen in my home. That same year we organized and hosted our first convention at the Tuller Hotel in downtown Detroit.

The Detroit chapter proved so successful that we helped organize similar chapters in Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia. The Tuskegee Airmen became incorporated in 1975, and we currently have more than thirty chapters, including chapters in Japan, Korea, Germany, England, and Alaska...We want others to learn our history and to spread our heritage. The officers and directors of the organization take no salaries or fees.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 113 – 114.

We preach education and ambition, especially to minority young people. We want them to become aware of the world of space technology and what it takes to live in it. Each year our National Scholarship Fund, which now totals more than \$1,700,000, awards at least forty \$1,500 grants to deserving disadvantaged high school students...In short, we want to do everything we can to help and inspire young people to become productive and fulfilled adults.”

The purpose of these Tuskegee chapters was to teach others about “our history and to spread our heritage,” preaching “education and ambition, especially to minority young people.” The officers and directors of the organization are all volunteers, receiving no salaries or fees. Membership is open to everyone, including civilians. The service-mindedness of Jefferson and his fellow airmen appears to have played a role in their meaning-making activity, which included establishing these chapters of Tuskegee Airmen. Jefferson affirms the extraordinary ties within and beyond himself in the last two sentences of chapter 8: “I’m happy to have been able to accomplish as much as I have...and to have been a witness to so many positive changes, especially in the area of civil rights. We Americans still face many challenges, but...I remain convinced that this is the finest country in the world.”⁸⁰

On racism and meaning for the Civil Rights Movement

Jefferson was aware of and made no pretenses about the presence of racism in his experience of life in America. In contrast to how whites referred to him (“Negro”), he continued to self-identify as “African American.” His sense of self deepened and solidified as he navigated anti-transcendent, racist moments and established meaning to them:⁸¹

The postwar civil rights movement was just beginning when I returned from service, but it profoundly affected my personal and professional life. It convinced me that so many things I had only dreamed of as a youth could now be part of my reality. As Tuskegee Airmen, we knew we had served our country with distinction in battle, but now we also

⁸⁰ Ibid, 118.

⁸¹ Ibid, 120.

wanted to join the civil rights movement and do everything we could to break down the remaining racial barriers within both the military and civilian sectors.

The anti-transcendent experience of racism triggered a meaning-making process for Jefferson that resulted in a more determined participation in the civil rights movement, creating extraordinary connections within himself as a Tuskegee Airman, and beyond himself, joining the civil rights movement and breaking down the remaining racial barriers.

“What did it all mean?”

Jefferson explicitly makes reference to meaning-making in his last pages when he asks the reader, “Looking back, what did it all mean?”⁸² The outcome of Jefferson’s analysis includes a stable sense of self and extraordinary ties with his fellow airmen, and all human beings. The last words of his memoir follow:⁸³

Looking back, what did it all mean? Tuskegee Airman Ed Gleed said it so well for all of us: “When we were in training at Tuskegee and in combat, we never gave it a thought that we were making history. All we wanted was to learn to fly as Army Air Corps pilots, fight for our country, and survive.”

Some sixty years have passed since we flew the unfriendly skies over Nazi Germany, but we Tuskegee Airmen are still fighter pilots. We have our reunions and we reminisce and laugh about “the good old days.” But we also are very proud of the changes we helped bring about both within and outside the military. Above all, we want our fellow Americans to know that the civil rights we fought so hard for are not for African Americans alone, but for all human beings.

In the final analysis, the Tuskegee Airmen did make history, and I am so very proud to have been one of them.

Not only does he affirm the stability of his sense of self (“Some sixty years have passed...but we Tuskegee Airmen are still fighter pilots.”), but he acknowledges those extraordinary connections made within and beyond himself, in space and time, making history in the American story.

⁸² Ibid, 121.

⁸³ Ibid, 121 – 122.

Conclusion

Jefferson is the only black service member whose memoir is analyzed in this study. His “everyday” heuristic was different in that his was not conditioned by fear or hatred, although as an African American he was often targeted as an object of fear or hatred in civil society. Boredom, sleep, and various forms of recreation were the norm at *Stalag Luft III*, where he spent most of his captivity. However, when the prisoners were transferred to *Stalag VIIA*, conditions more closely reflected what the other POW memoirists reported.

Jefferson’s meaning-making appears to be focused on events that addressed his sense of self as an African American or as a Tuskegee Airman. The event at Dachau is anomalous in that one might have expected it to have carried the markers of an anti-transcendent event, but instead it appears to be processed in the narrative as neither everyday nor anti-transcendent. No meaning-making of this event is evident in his narrative, nor is there any mention of ill-effects of the experience. It is possible that the author censored any meaning-making processes from this account, but we cannot know that for certain by exegeting the text alone. Jefferson responds meaningfully to anti-transcendent events such as racism and transcendent ones after the war such as opening the first chapter of *Tuskegee Airmen*. His narrative as a whole appears to leave traces of the positive outcomes of meaning-making: stabilization of one’s sense of self, and extraordinary connections within and beyond the self.

Comparing Sirianni with Jefferson

Both Sirianni and Jefferson were American airmen who were shot down and captured by the Germans, but their POW experiences appear to be markedly different. Sirianni was enlisted and Jefferson was an officer, which influenced which camp they were sent to once captured.

Sirianni was held for fifteen months, while Jefferson was held eight months. Sirianni's experience at *Stalag Luft I* left him scarred, with noticeable PTS symptoms fifty years later, while Jefferson stated that he experienced no fear during his captivity at *Stalag Luft III*, and reported no significant ill-effects after being released. Sirianni's loss of freedom became an existential crisis, but Jefferson understood that he "was just going to have to sit out my captivity." Sirianni's "everyday" included maggot soup, daily routines that included fear of punishment, and the use of vulgar language to cope with the strong emotions associated with their loss of freedom and their treatment by their captors. Jefferson's "everyday," on the other hand, included boredom, sleep, and minor discomforts for most of his captivity.

Meaning-making between the two authors was marked by different types of events in different contextual backgrounds. For Sirianni, freedom and the abuses he endured while captive served as the canvas on which events of extraordinary personal significance were recorded and processed. Sirianni successfully established meaning when he shared his story in written form and sought the help of a psychologist for his PTS, resulting in extraordinary ties within and beyond himself, as well as alleviation from the sleep disturbances and flashbacks. He also noted that this process of sharing his story was good for him, in that he was finally able to share with his family and friends what he had bottled up inside for so long.

For Jefferson, racism and his evolving sense of self were the backdrop for events of extraordinary personal significance. Jefferson established meaning through his service, both as an African American and as a Tuskegee Airman. He saw his memoir as a way to "finish the job" of writing down his recollections, but did not explicitly attribute any therapeutic benefit associated with the memoir writing.

Whether one author was more resilient than the other is impossible to tell from this analysis. What we can see, however, is that transcendence as meaning-making process was important and traceable in these narratives, and positive outcomes from successfully establishing meaning were also traceable. The potentially negative consequence of not establishing meaning for anti-transcendent events was also evident in Sirianni's memoir, though not in Jefferson's.

World War II Memoirs: Japan

This section will track transcendence and its inputs and outputs for three memoirists: Chester M. Biggs, Jr., Richard M. Gordon, and Herbert Zincke, who were captured during World War II and taken prisoner by the Japanese. Biggs was a Marine who was surrendered to the Japanese by Col. William Ashurst shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. He was serving in Northern China at the time, and was later transferred to several camps located in China, Korea, and eventually Japan before he was liberated three and a half years later. Gordon was enlisted in the Army and serving in the Philippines when he was surrendered after losing the battle of Bataan. After surviving the Bataan Death March, he was shipped to Japan, where he spent almost three years as a POW. Zincke had been serving in the Army Air Corps before being surrendered by General Fort on May 26, 1942. Zincke also survived the Bataan Death March before being shipped to Japan, where he spent the rest of his imprisonment until the war ended.

It will be divided into four parts. The first part will analyze Biggs' memoir, the second, Gordon's memoir, and the third, Zincke's memoir. The fourth part will compare the three memoirists, discussing similarities and differences in transcendence.

Chester M. Biggs, Jr.

Chester Biggs was serving at a marine compound in Peiping (now Beijing) in December of 1941 when Col. William W. Ashurst surrendered the marine forces in North China unconditionally to the Japanese.⁸⁴ Just twenty years old at the time, he was imprisoned for 3.5 years and moved to five different camp locations, distributed between China, Korea, and Japan. Biggs is the only of the three POW memoirists under Japanese control who was held in camps across these three regions. Conditions appeared to worsen with each transfer, although the Fusan camp (now Pusan, Korea), where they stayed before going to Hokkaido, was considered the worst they encountered in their 3.5 years' imprisonment, largely due to the scarcity of water, abundance of rats, and the stench of urine and "other unpleasant odors that I could never identify."⁸⁵

A baseline of Biggs' everyday experience as a POW included the "unsavory characters," or the Japanese men placed in charge of the prisoners at different times. For example, there was the "Beast of the East" (or just the "Beast") at Kiangwan POW camp,⁸⁶ his "equal" at Camp Three in Hokkaido,⁸⁷ and Kenichi Kikuchi, also at Hokkaido, who was the mess steward, whom Biggs describes as "the most obnoxious character of them all," refusing to issue the Red Cross supplies and stealing from both the Japanese and Red Cross rations.⁸⁸

Hard labor was another aspect of Biggs' everyday heuristic, whether it was work on the Woosung Canal,⁸⁹ building a replica of Mt. Fuji at the Kiangwan camp,⁹⁰ working on the Great

⁸⁴ Biggs, Jr., *Behind the Barbed Wire: Memoir of a World War II US Marine Captured in North China in 1941 and Imprisoned by the Japanese until 1945*, 10.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 165 – 166.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 93.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 183.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 116 – 117.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 122 – 131.

Ditch in Fengtai camp,⁹¹ or working the coal mines in Hokkaido.⁹² Disease, unsanitary conditions, poor food and medical quality, and exhaustion were part of the regular accompaniment throughout Biggs' POW experience.

Rotting food was a notable aspect of daily life that became routine. Biggs mentioned how they were often served rotting fish in various stages of decomposition as part of their rations, and they started throwing out the fish after a couple of bad experiences.⁹³ The prisoners found ways to hide the fact that they were throwing the fish away instead of eating it, because they believed that if the Japanese found out about it, then they would reduce their already meager rations. Scarcity of drinking water contributed to regularly dehydrated workers, especially those that worked in the mines.⁹⁴

The beauty of moonlight

One could posit that the everyday conditions described by Biggs were in many ways, ugly, or "frightful, dire; offensive or unpleasant to any sense."⁹⁵ In the midst of this "ugliness," Biggs appeared to make note of its opposite, beauty, at different points in his memoir, in reference to two types: feminine (women) and natural (like the moon). In one instance, Biggs establishes meaning for his experience of the beautiful, which he sandwiches between two passages that trace their movements as prisoners of the Japanese. After disembarking from the train in the Kiangsu province, the prisoners were marched towards Pukow and arrived on the

⁹¹ Ibid, 164 – 165.

⁹² Ibid, 178 – 180.

⁹³ Ibid, 177.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 178.

⁹⁵ "Ugly," Merriam-Webster definition, accessed Apr. 27, 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ugly>.

banks of the Yangtze River, which they had to cross to get the next train. While crossing, Biggs noticed the beauty of the moonlight:⁹⁶

I remember the half-hour river crossing well, because the weather had cleared and the moon was out. In the cold, crisp night air, the moonlight was as beautiful as any I had ever seen. Several men commented on it. Though we faced an uncertain future, we were beginning to appreciate the simple things of life, things that in the past we had taken for granted. I have learned that as long as we can appreciate these things we still have hope for the future, no matter how bleak things may seem.

The very next paragraph describes the process of transferring to another train that would take them to Shanghai. The everyday drudgery of being marched across the country was disrupted by the beauty of the moon. The reader is prompted to recognize that Biggs' everyday heuristic was suspended and that the experience of beholding was extraordinary when he describes the beauty of the moonlight ("as beautiful as any I had ever seen"). He authenticates his perception of beauty by noting that others also noticed ("several men commented on it"). In the midst of an uncertain future, Biggs noticed that if they could appreciate the "simple things" of life, they could still "have hope for the future." The appreciation of these simple things (like natural beauty) gave meaning: hope.

The Graves – Part I

When Biggs was at the Woosung POW camp, the prisoners were forced to build a canal, which "ran out across the countryside, going nowhere in particular."⁹⁷ In order to make room for the 15-foot-deep canal, they occasionally came across family graves scattered throughout the area. He describes the process below:⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Biggs, Jr., *Behind the Barbed Wire: Memoir of a World War II US Marine Captured in North China in 1941 and Imprisoned by the Japanese until 1945*, 81.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 116.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 117.

The work on the canal went forward. As is common in the rural areas of China, family graves were scattered throughout the area. From the outside, the graves all appeared to be the same. A simple mound of earth with a small altar where offerings were placed many times a year. Beneath the surface of the ground there was a difference. Some of the graves were simple holes in the ground in which a wooden coffin had been placed. Other graves, however, were more elaborate. The coffins in these graves were enclosed in structures built of slabs of granite or brick. Regardless of what the grave was built of, if they lay within the boundaries of the canal, we dug them up and tossed the contents to one side. Many of these graves were old, the coffin and the corpse fully decomposed, except for the bones and a few pieces of wood. Some graves contained corpses that were still in the process of decomposition. Then the removal became messy.

When we approached a grave site, usually the family of the departed made an appearance at the site and demanded that they be allowed to remove their ancestors and intern them at another location. Sometimes the Japanese permitted them to do so, but more often, the request was denied, and we were troubled with a group of Chinese trying to retrieve the remains once we had dumped them. At first we were reluctant to disturb these gravesites, but we had no choice. After a while we became hardened and attacked each grave site with very little compassion.

The act of desecrating the graves in order to make room for the canal initially suspended Biggs' everyday heuristic ("we were reluctant to disturb these gravesites"), and he seems to speak both for himself and his fellow prisoners. The event was anti-transcendent, carrying markers that would normally inhibit meaning-making from occurring: disturbing another person's grave runs counter to most human conventions. Destroying several people's graves for the purposes of building a canal under duress threatened a chaotic internal existence.

Evidence of Biggs' meaning-making of this event is scant. He makes two comments about it: a) "we had no choice"; and b) "we became hardened." The outcomes, "becoming hardened" and "attacking each grave site with very little compassion," suggests that Biggs' failed to establish meaning for this anti-transcendent event. The result, as per my model, could include severing of extraordinary connections within and beyond the self. This narrative fragment suggests that Biggs may have failed to make meaning of this event, resulting in the severing of extraordinary ties with his fellow human beings, such as the families whose graves he destroyed,

along with the dead whose remains he desecrated. The result: he became hardened and attacked those graves with very little compassion.

The Graves – Part II

The event of desecrating graves was not limited to Biggs' experience at Woosung camp. His next camp, designated Kiangwan Prisoner of War Camp, was initially laid out with a garden to supplement their rations. The lack of work details other than that "was soon rectified," when Captain Endo announced that the camp would build a replica of Mt. Fuji that would be a memorial to the Japanese soldiers killed in the action of taking the Shanghai area.⁹⁹ The work progressed, six days a week, regardless of the weather. Biggs noted that as the work proceeded, they lost more weight, and their bodies "became nothing but corded muscles and skin."¹⁰⁰ In the midst of their deterioration, Biggs recalled the scenes in which they destroyed small farm plots and burial sites:¹⁰¹

In building Mt. Fuji many small farm plots and ancestral burial sites were destroyed. The Chinese stood by and silently watched as we dug up and destroyed the small farms that had been in the family from time immemorial. With the destruction of an ancestral grave the family swarmed into the construction area screaming, shouting, and weeping. Sometimes the Japanese delayed work long enough for the family to remove the remains and take them elsewhere for burial. Normally, they drove the family off with rifle butts, and we proceeded with the destruction of the grave. Many graves were elaborately constructed of slabs of granite or brick; but regardless of the construction, we callously dumped the remains out on the earth, dug out the brick and granite slabs, and hauled them away to the edge of the lake. Coffins were broken up and eventually used to kindle small fires to warm our hands during cold weather. We displayed little reverence for the dead or sympathy for the family. Our finer emotions were slowly being ground away.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 122.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 128.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 129.

In this narrative fragment, Biggs uses markers that indicate these anti-transcendent events had become part of their everyday heuristic, from the “callous” dumping of remains to the use of the coffins as kindling for small fires. We also find the negative results of the failure to make meaning of these events: “our finer emotions were slowly being ground away.” Those extraordinary connections within and beyond the self were repeatedly weakened with every new act of destruction of these graves.

The paragraph immediately following this account tells of how, when they reached the 20-foot level of the mountain, “the Beast told us that...we would hold a track and field meet to celebrate the occasion.”¹⁰² Biggs recalls, “Strangely enough, I think we did enjoy the day. Especially since the Beast was in a jovial mood and did not raise his voice to anyone or strike anyone.”¹⁰³ Meaning-making does not appear to have occurred for either of the “graves” accounts. Furthermore, Biggs documents the severing of human ties within and beyond himself and his company: loss of reverence for the dead; loss of sympathy for the families of the dead whose graves they destroyed; the grinding away of their finer emotions.

“The first white women we encountered”

Shortly after Biggs and his fellow POWs were liberated, they made a stop in Guam for medical attention and debriefing with naval intelligence. At the hospital, Biggs recalls his first encounter with white women in years:¹⁰⁴

The first white women we encountered were on Guam. It was a unique experience. It had been years since we had seen a white woman and months since we had even thought about them. When we marched into the hospital the morning after our arrival, there they were, two nurses in white starched uniforms, both well groomed. It might sound corny, but we stood there tongue-tied with our mouths agape. I do not

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 194 – 195.

suppose those two women ever knew the profound effect they had on us. I do not know that I can describe the emotional effects that I experienced, but it brought home a loneliness that can only be fulfilled with female companionship. I do not think any of us realized just how empty our lives had been.

This encounter made us realize for the first time we were returning to a world that included women and children. Too long we had lived alone in a masculine world thinking only of today and survival. Now we were entering an entirely different environment. That was thought-provoking and would take a while getting used to. We were a quiet bunch as we moved through the various phases of our examinations. Each man was engrossed with his own thoughts of home and loved ones. It wasn't until we cleared the hospital and returned to the barracks that we completely recovered from the shock. Naturally, there were many remarks made about the nurses, but strange as it may seem, none of the remarks were disparaging. That, in itself, was remarkable.

The event of seeing these white women was extraordinary for them, and their response corresponded with a state in which their everyday heuristic was suspended ("we stood there tongue-tied and with our mouths agape"). Biggs noted two effects from this event; a) profound loneliness that can only be fulfilled with female companionship; b) realization of how empty his life had been as a prisoner of war. Meaning was established for this event: they realized that they were returning to a world that included women and children. Biggs also noticed the contrast between a feminine presence and the "masculine world" in which they had dwelled, thinking "only of today and survival". The lack of disparaging remarks was also remarkable for Biggs – almost as if the women had helped restore their earlier loss of "finer emotions," their "becoming hardened" by the forced labor over the past few years.

Conclusion

Biggs' everyday experiences as a POW included "unsavory characters" found among his captors, hard labor, and being served rotting food to eat. In many ways these conditions could be described as "ugly," and the things that caught his eye were sometimes extraordinary opposites to the ugliness that he experienced every day. Examples of events that suspended his everyday

heuristic in this way included natural beauty, such as moonlight, and the beauty of the women he met or saw. Also potentially suspending his everyday heuristic were things that went beyond the “normal” sense of daily ugliness, such as violating taboos (e.g., desecrating people’s graves and remains).

Biggs most often spoke of his reactions to extraordinary events in first person plural form (we): “we speculated...we thought of war,”¹⁰⁵ “we would swear,”¹⁰⁶ “we enjoyed,”¹⁰⁷ and “we dreaded,”¹⁰⁸ for example. This made tracking Biggs’ meaning-making difficult, since his text had so much of first person plural was embedded in those moments. His memoir contained a mixture of extraordinary events, positive and negative, in which meaning-making did not always happen or was not tracked in the narrative.

One transcendent events and two anti-transcendent events were analyzed in Biggs’ memoir. The captivating nature of the two transcendent events (beauty of the moonlight; women of his race) were starkly contrasted with the self-numbing nature of anti-transcendent events (destruction of people’s graves while carrying out forced labor). Personal relevance and meaning for these events was muted in comparison with the other POW memoirs, which may have been something particular to his personality. I listened to a 73-minute interview with Chester Biggs, in which he recalled much of the details of his memoir.¹⁰⁹ His interview exhibited the same pattern of muted explication of meaning, using first person plural whenever referring to the meaning of different events.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 5.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 27.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 55.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 144.

¹⁰⁹ “Interview with Chester M. Biggs, Jr.,” Veterans History Project.

Biggs' memoir was the most difficult to exegete because he folded his own reactions into a collective first-person voice, rather than use his own singular voice. Transcendence as meaning-making process was challenging to trace in the text, but traces were there. Also captured were examples of anti-transcendence and the outcomes of failing to make meaning of those anti-transcendent events. Becoming hardened, loss of reverence for the dead, lack of compassion for the families whose graves they destroyed, and the "grinding away of finer emotions" were all associated with these failures to make meaning of the anti-transcendent.

Richard M. Gordon

Richard Gordon had been serving just under two years when he was captured in the Philippines after the fall of Bataan. He was twenty years old at the time. Perhaps most striking about Gordon's memoir is how vividly he describes the "contemptible behavior of American prisoners of war" in his experience. After establishing a baseline of the "everyday," six different events (two anti-transcendent, four transcendent) will be analyzed. Before outlining these events, it is important to give voice to Gordon's note about his resilience from the POW experience.

Gordon believed that the harshness of his "ghetto upbringing" in Hell's Kitchen prepared him well for his experience as a POW, and this is mentioned more than once in his memoir.¹¹⁰ His father's desertion of the family when Gordon was eight, his mother's alcoholism, his maternal grandfather's violent tempers, their overall poverty, and his brief bout with homelessness as a teen were described in the first chapter of his memoir.

The first two events analyzed from Gordon's memoir were extraordinary, personally relevant, positive events (transcendent), in that the genuine kindness of the two men described in

¹¹⁰ Gordon, *Horyo: Memoirs of an American POW*, 1, 12.

these events deeply moved him. One of the men was American, the other was not. His note of the extraordinary American is significant because Gordon's overall portrayal of his fellow Americans in his memoir is very negative. Two anti-transcendent events are analyzed after that, followed by two more transcendent events.

The “everyday” baseline

Gordon's baseline of “everyday” experiences included beatings, the threatening nature of the Japanese language as spoken by his captors, and the taboo of having anything Japanese in one's possession.¹¹¹ Also part of his everyday experience were parasites (fleas, bedbugs, lice, mosquitoes)¹¹² and accompanying diseases (malaria, infections).¹¹³ Medical conditions in Japan were the worst that Gordon encountered “anywhere in our captivity, if that's possible.”¹¹⁴ Predators were also often mentioned by Gordon. He described how prisoners became predators in his preface:¹¹⁵

In the Japanese prisoner of war camps of World War II, many POWs were “so utterly, unbearably crushed that [they] despaired of life.” Many of these prisoners ‘despaired’ to such an extent that they resorted to any means to survive, at the expense of their fellow prisoners. As unbelievable as it may sound, many became quite wealthy in these camps. They made exorbitant profits selling simple foodstuffs and medications. These individuals were the “predators.” It was the “free enterprise,” “what the market will bear” instinct in its most depraved form, and it existed in every prison camp which held American prisoners of war.

Gordon's description of the predatory behavior bears remarkable resemblance to Richard Radford's description of economic organization of a POW camp, which was cited in the introduction. A difference between Gordon and Radford is that Gordon focused on the negative

¹¹¹ Ibid, 83 – 84; 90.

¹¹² Ibid, 149 – 150.

¹¹³ Ibid, 112; 121; 125.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 152.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, xi.

aspects of this behavior, while Radford distinguished between something morally questionable, like opportunism, and something more seemingly neutral, like a simple trade. The “normal” perception of Gordon’s fellow American POWs was very negative.

Bill Standish of Chicago – an exceptional American

Early in his captivity, Gordon recalls a time when his captors forced all the prisoners to disembark from a train on one side of a tunnel to walk to the other side and board another car. The snow was heavy, and Gordon reported that there was about ten inches on the ground when they detrained.¹¹⁶ He describes his ordeal and subsequent extraordinary encounter with Bill:¹¹⁷

Somewhere on the mountain my legs, weakened by my illnesses, soon gave out. I lay down alongside the trail not caring whether I lived or died. The cold had become unbearable. Not one American that night had any clothing other than the short-sleeved shirt and trousers cut down at the knees that he had left the Philippines with. I soon found myself freezing to death. All I wanted to do was sleep. Almost asleep, I was roused by a fellow American. This apparently strong individual, later identified as Bill Standish of Chicago, Illinois, literally picked me up off the ground, stood me on my feet, put my arm around his neck, and proceeded to drag me up the hill. Releasing me there, he reasoned I could walk downhill. For that act of kindness that undoubtedly saved my life, I have always been grateful to Bill. Exceptional men like him must never be forgotten.

The extremely unpleasant near-death nature of the event marks it as a personally relevant, extraordinarily negative moment. The experience is shifted from negative to positive when Bill Standish picks him up from the ground and drags him up the hill towards their destination. The outcome of this event was an extraordinary connection within and beyond himself: Bill’s act of kindness established coordinates in moral space for Gordon, resulting in a norm: “exceptional men like him must never be forgotten.”

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 142.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 143.

Cecil Fernandez the Eurasian – Gordon’s best friend in Mitsushima

The day after his arrival at Mitsushima, Gordon recalled seeing over two hundred British prisoners captured at Singapore enter, along with Eurasians belonging to Singapore’s Special Training Corp, who were also captured in Singapore. It was among these Eurasians that he met his best friend:¹¹⁸

For the most part these were fine men who showed a loyalty to one another that was hard to find in Americans. From this group emerged the best friend I had in Mitsushima, a black lad named Cecil Fernandez. With his father a Portuguese seaman and his mother an Indian from Ceylon, Cecil was quite dark. His features were definitely Caucasian with a fine aquiline nose and narrow lips. Because of his skin color, he was resented by white prisoners, namely Americans. Our friendship was resented, again by Americans, and I was known as a “nigger lover” by some southerners. Racism was definitely a part of my military era!

My friendship with Cecil began the night that I experienced my first malaria attack in Japan, three weeks after arriving. When the chills began one evening, my fellow Americans either could not or would not help me in any way. Cecil, who slept in the same bay as I did but who hardly knew me, decided I needed to somehow get warm. With this thought in mind he went to the kitchen and placed a good-sized rock in the open fire underneath a cauldron being prepared for next morning’s meal. Heating the rock for a long period of time he wrapped it in a burlap covering, brought it back to where I slept, and placed it under my blanket near my feet.

While I wondered who the Good Samaritan was, I enjoyed the heat generated by the stone. Several days later I had overcome my malaria attack and, in asking who had helped me, I learned that a “half-breed black” had stepped up to help without even knowing me. I was immediately in his debt, and I vowed to help him whenever I could.

His account of his friendship with Cecil carries both transcendent and anti-transcendent markers, promoting extraordinary ties with one (Cecil) and working against extraordinary ties with others (Americans). His everyday heuristic was suspended when a stranger put a warm rock wrapped in burlap to keep him warm, while he was suffering from malaria. Again, there was meaning established regarding the extraordinary kindness of a stranger (“I was immediately in his debt”), along with coordinates in moral space that also resulted in a new norm: “I vowed to help him whenever I could.”

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 152 – 153.

Verble Jones – the American camp bully

In contrast with the positive meaning in his friendship with Cecil, Gordon also recalls the meaning of a different relationship with a fellow American POW named Verble Jones, whom Gordon grew to despise over time. Below is his narrative of his observation of Jones and the meaning he ascribed to events that involved him:¹¹⁹

Verble Jones, a “southern gentleman” by his definition from Selma, Alabama, had been chosen by a buddy in charge of the prisoners’ mess to work in the kitchen as a wood cutter. Since this type of work required considerable strength, he and two other cutters received extra rations plus what they could steal. Both their diet and exercise led to their being in excellent condition for most of the war, at least in the eyes of their fellow prisoners.

Soon after getting himself in good condition, Jones became the camp bully. Nightly he would challenge American, British, Chinese, or Dutch to fight him with his announcement that he was “king of the camp.” Jones had many fights. He lost none in three years. The British-Singapore group came to detest him as did the Americans who did not seek anything from him in the way of extra food which he obtained from the kitchen. He engaged in numerous fist-fights, and while the Japanese did not sanction the fights they did not prohibit them either. Since the fights took place in front of a barracks, Japanese guards on duty enjoyed watching the show. The fight would end when Jones’ opponent, or victim, would say he had enough. Watching him I felt ashamed to be an American.

Although part of his everyday heuristic involved coping with the presence of predatory behavior, Jones had already suspended his everyday heuristic when he found out earlier that Jones was the one who spiked his food with unbearably hot curry, while he was afflicted with scurvy and smoke blindness.¹²⁰ Gordon developed moral coordinates regarding his experiences with Jones: “Watching him I felt ashamed to be an American.” Gordon also noted later in his memoir that Jones was always a coward, and that his cowardliness was always evident.¹²¹ One could argue that Gordon stabilized his sense of self in response to seeing how Jones behaved by placing himself in permanent opposition to him, even after they were released to go home.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 154.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 153 – 154.

¹²¹ Ibid, 204.

The heartless Americans

Gordon's bitterness towards his fellow American POWs was clear from the beginning of his memoir, in which he identified Americans among the "predators" found in the prison camps. This bitterness was interlaced throughout his memoir as an underlying theme. An interpretive key to his bitterness could be found in Chapter 17 ("Learning the language"), where he recalled his first year in Japan. His reflection at the beginning of Chapter 17 follows:¹²²

Captain Alfred Weinstein, Medical Corps, summed up the behavior of most prisoners in his book *Barbed Wire Surgeon* when he wrote, "Does man continue to love his brother when steeped in disease, chronic starvation, and death? How low in animal-like behavior can man sink and still revert to manliness?" Weinstein saw prisoners of war and their lives as "a tale of mankind with his veneer of civilization stripped away." No better words were ever written to describe the behavior of most American prisoners of war held by the Japanese. I saw less of this behavior among the British prisoners. I cannot speak for the other nationalities.

The heartless actions of my fellow American prisoners are what I remember most fifty years later. To this group as a whole I cannot extend my hand in friendship. Memories of their self-serving behavior will stay with me until I die. In gatherings of former prisoners of war I see men who meet and greet each other as though they had been lifelong friends. This leaves me with an impression of artificial friendliness and shallow insincerity.

Weinstein notes the blurring of a line between human and animal when humans are subjected to severe conditions of disease, starvation and death. His "veneer of civilization" is stripped away. This was Gordon's observation of American prisoners of war held by the Japanese. Gordon states that the memories of the "heartless actions of my fellow Americans" will stay with him until he dies.

Although he never explicitly states what behavior he expected of his fellow American prisoners, he appears to portray them as violators of a rubric of morals that Gordon held interiorly. This apparent violation of this moral code may have suspended his everyday heuristic, even in the midst of other predators. He established meaning for these anti-transcendent events

¹²² Ibid, 169 – 170.

by confirming the dissonance between him and them, and stabilizing his sense of self in opposition to them. The coordinates in moral space associated with these fellow Americans were clear for Gordon: “to this group as a whole I cannot extend my hand in friendship.”

The admirable British

Shortly after disparaging his fellow Americans, Gordon comments on the British prisoners, in much less harsh terms. He describes the contrast between the Americans and British below:¹²³

A great deal of animosity existed between Americans and British in Mitsushima, and to me the actions of the Americans caused the situation. Nor did Americans make the least attempt to improve conditions. The British at least tried. What always impressed me about the British was their ability to make the best of a bad situation. They would sing when they had no reason to. They put on shows even though they had very little energy left. They put on a good face even to the Japanese. They just refused to let the Japanese get to them. I admired them then as soldiers, an admiration I carry with me to this day.

We can tell that Gordon’s everyday heuristic was suspended by his exposure to the British (“What always impressed me about the British...”). In contrast with Americans, who did not make “the least attempt to improve conditions,” the British, in his mind, had the ability to make the best of a bad situation. He established meaning for these events (“They just refused to let the Japanese get to them.”), and as a result, established extraordinary connections within and beyond himself in an enduring way (“I admired them as soldiers, an admiration I carry with me to this day.”).

¹²³ Ibid, 175.

Liberation: “The happiest day of one’s life”

Liberation, the regaining of freedom, is consistently seen as a very good thing among these POWs, and Gordon recalled the experience and effects of the event of August 15, 1945 as the happiest day of his life:¹²⁴

How does one describe the happiest day of one’s life? Beginning with the 15th day of August 1945, happiness became an everyday feeling. The euphoria we felt upon awakening each morning defies description, a feeling that lasted for months! It was truly a “high,” unequaled at any time in all my life. To suddenly rejoin the human race with the rights, respect, and dignity we had been deprived of for three-and-a-half years is indescribable. Ask any former prisoner of the Japanese. I know that a description on my part is impossible. How does one describe being born? Old memories deliberately suppressed for years were suddenly allowed back in my mind. Thoughts of family, friends, and one’s country flooded our waking moments. It was a feeling akin to intoxication. Paramount in our thoughts was our pride in our country. We had placed our faith in our country and it did not let us down.

The new “norm” for Gordon and his fellow prisoners was happiness, in stark contrast to his reflection on how unfair life could be just before they were liberated.¹²⁵ The crux of meaning can be found in the middle of Gordon’s pericope: to suddenly rejoin the human race with the rights, respect, and dignity we had been deprived of for three-and-a-half years is indescribable. Implicitly Gordon acknowledged having lived a sub-human existence up to that point. Several kinds of extraordinary connections within and beyond the self were the outcomes of Gordon’s meaning-making of his liberation: a) old memories deliberately suppressed for years were suddenly allowed back in his mind; b) thoughts of family and friends flooded his waking moments; and c) paramount in his thoughts was pride in his country (we had placed faith in our country and it did not let us down). Gordon used a mixture of first person singular and first-person plural to describe how meaning was established for this event.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 197.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 191.

Conclusion

Gordon's memoir began with an introduction to his teen years and the harshness of his upbringing in Hell's Kitchen, which he explicitly credited as a protective factor against the conditions of imprisonment during World War II. Violence, addiction, abandonment, and homelessness were all part of his experience as a youth before he enlisted. This "inoculation" helped him survive the everyday experiences of beatings, the threatening nature of his captors' language, and the presence of predators in his camp.

Gordon transcended extraordinary, personally relevant events, both positive and negative, during his time as a prisoner under the Japanese. Four transcendent events focused on individuals (Bill Standish and Cecil Fernandez), groups (the British), and liberation. Bill Standish was an American that Gordon identified as exceptional, whose kindness he remembered and wanted others to know about via this memoir. Cecil Fernandez, a Eurasian captured in Singapore along with the British, was a non-American that Gordon identified as his best friend. Being dark-skinned, Cecil was resented by the other American POWs and Gordon recalled the racist remarks they made as a result ("nigger lover"). The good qualities of the British prisoners were contrasted with the bad qualities of the American prisoners. He established meaning of these observations, noting his admiration of the good qualities he saw in the British and his shame regarding the qualities he saw in his fellow Americans. Liberation, the end of the war, was the happiest day of Gordon's life, and by reflecting on the meaning of this event, that is, rejoining the human race with the rights, respect, and dignity they were deprived of for 3.5 years, he established extraordinary ties within and beyond himself, with family, friends, and country.

The two anti-transcendent events analyzed here focused on his negative experience with fellow American POWs. They were selected because he made a strong point in his preface about

his negative experiences with them: “The contemptible behavior of too many American prisoners of war in the Philippines...will be a recurrent theme of this book.”¹²⁶ One anti-transcendent event focused on a single American named Verble Jones, and the other referred to the group of Americans as a whole whose self-serving behavior Gordon remembered fifty years later. Gordon’s resentment against many of his fellow American POWs was an underlying theme of his memoir. It provides an insight into transcendence as meaning-making process – it does not necessarily imply forgiveness. Gordon was able to establish meaning for these anti-transcendent moments, but the coordinates he established in moral space regarding these men were very negative indeed. They served as a reference point of what he did not want to be, but also sharpened his sense of justice.

If we revisit his life after the war, we can see a certain continuity between these coordinates in moral space and his career choices. Shortly after returning from World War II, he got married, started a family, earned a degree in criminal justice from the University of Maryland and later joined the Long Island, NY police force.¹²⁷ His civilian career included serving as an investigator for the District Attorney of Suffolk County (NY); Assistant Director, Suffolk County Mental Health Board; Assistant Director, Drug Control Board; and Assistant Professor at St. Petersburg Junior College in Florida.¹²⁸

Herbert Zincke

Compared with the other two memoirists in this section, Zincke served the longest before he was captured by the Japanese (five years). Like Gordon, Zincke survived the Bataan Death

¹²⁶ Ibid, xiii.

¹²⁷ “Richard Gordon,” Brooke County Public Library, accessed Feb. 3, 2017, http://philippine-defenders.lib.wv.us/html/gordon_richard_bio.html.

¹²⁸ Gordon, *Horyo: Memoirs of an American POW*.

March and was transported by ship (*Tottori Maru*) to Japan,¹²⁹ where he spent the rest of his imprisonment. Zincke's account is based primarily on a journal he secretly kept while prisoner.¹³⁰ This section will discuss Zincke's memoir, first establishing a baseline for his "everyday heuristic," and then analyzing four passages. The first passage recalls his experience of God when he encountered some cherry trees towards the end of the war, while he was still a prisoner of the Japanese. The second through fourth passages all occur after he was liberated: a) connecting with a Japanese family; b) the welcome at Yokohama; and c) his first American meal after liberation. The last part of this section will offer some concluding thoughts.

The "everyday" baseline

Zincke's preface refers to aspects of the "everyday" experience as prisoners of war in Japan during World War II. Brutality, loss of life, malnutrition, and medical neglect were all listed as common to his camp as well as others. His introductory account of the everyday follows:¹³¹

I spent almost three years at the Kawasaki slave labor camp on Tokyo Bay. The barracks building belonged to the Mitsui Corporation. We had been there only a few weeks when we named it the "Mitsui Madhouse" — most appropriate because of the crazy and brutal treatment being meted out by the soldiers and guards of the Japanese Army. Yet there are many true reports of worse treatment at the other 126 slave labor camps in Japan.

But the kind of brutality that occurred at our camp, and losses of life from malnutrition and medical neglect, probably happened at all of the camps. At Kawasaki we kept up our morale by sticking together in many different situations. For instance, a few men could always be counted upon to make a wisecrack when a fellow prisoner seemed about to fight back when pounded by Japanese blows. Such spontaneous efforts to protect each other still brighten my memories.

¹²⁹ Zincke, *Mitsui Madhouse: Memoir of a US Army Air Corps POW in World War II*, 63.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

The nickname of “Mitsui Madhouse” gives the reader an idea of the author’s daily experiences at the Kawasaki labor camp. He also described in this narrative fragment how he and his fellow POWs coped with these conditions (sticking together, protecting each other). Stealing was another everyday aspect of Zincke’s life at the camp, which he mentions almost 50 times (steal-, stole-, pilfer-) throughout his memoir.¹³² Examples of stealing included the cook letting his friends steal food,¹³³ prisoners on work detail always looking for rice to steal,¹³⁴ guards stealing prisoners’ personal pictures, letters, and other items,¹³⁵ the Javanese getting beaten for stealing various goods,¹³⁶ and prisoners stealing soap.¹³⁷ Zincke was prone to injury or sickness, and these states, too, could be considered part of his “everyday” experience, as well as his vantage point from the hospital section. Some examples of his health issues include: a blister on his heel getting severely infected and had to be lanced or treated several times;¹³⁸ a condition known as beriberi, which causes painful swelling in the legs;¹³⁹ diphtheria;¹⁴⁰ and finally an injury to his legs when he was hit by a crane shovel in the back and he flipped and landed between two cars.¹⁴¹

The physical abuse, hard labor, scarcity of food, and scant medical care forced prisoners to cope in a variety of ways, including “sticking together,” stealing food and other items, and trading with other prisoners. The pilfering sometimes took on more elaborate patterns, like

¹³² Verbs captured included words and roots of steal (18), stole (17), and pilfer (10), a total of 47 occurrences. “Loot” was repeated 14 times, as nouns and verbs, often in conjunction with one or more of the verbs above.

¹³³ Zincke, *Mitsui Madhouse: Memoir of a US Army Air Corps POW in World War II*, 59.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 76.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 64, 80.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 103, 111.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 123 – 124.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 52, 77 – 84.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 74 – 81.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 86

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 129.

Blackie's rice conspiracy¹⁴² and Zincke's own system of stealing from the offices and buildings to trade with other prisoners.¹⁴³

God and the cherry trees

Close to the end of the war, American bombers attacked their area and the prisoners' work schedule was disrupted due to the numerous air alerts. During this time, Zincke roamed the countryside and recalled an encounter with beauty and God:¹⁴⁴

I climbed over a ridge and found myself alone in a grove of cherry trees — some still in bloom. One B-29 flew over, and then everything was still. I lay down on the grass and looked upward at the pink blossoms and the vivid blue sky. I forgot the hated word “war” and our lowly state as prisoners of war. A feeling of being near God swept over me, and I fell into a restful sleep for an hour or so. Then I roamed among the trees, eating the occasional cherry that had ripened until the All Clear signal called me back to virtual slavery. I learned later that, oddly enough, I was enjoying nature's beauty at almost the same time that the war took a final, decisive turn — at 8:15 that morning a B-29 dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

Zincke's everyday heuristic was suspended (“I forgot the hated word ‘war’ and our lowly state as prisoners of war”). The experience was extraordinary in that a feeling of “being near God swept over me,” and it was positive in that he was “enjoying nature's beauty.” My model posits no negative consequences if meaning is not established for extraordinary, personally relevant, positive experiences. However, he did later establish meaning for this event – it was about the same time that a B-29 dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. The event also had anti-transcendent markers, such as being “called back to virtual slavery”; however, the positive characteristics of the event appear to have outweighed the negative in his meaning-making process.

¹⁴² Ibid, 76, 81, 101.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 115.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 145.

Connecting with a Japanese family

Shortly after they were liberated but before they left Japan, Zincke and a fellow service member were invited to a Japanese home for some food. He describes the encounter below:¹⁴⁵

That evening Sgt. Charles Johnson and I were invited into a Japanese home for tea with pickled onions and cucumber. I felt guilty eating their food, because they had so little for themselves. I carried the brunt of the conversation because Johnson spoke no Japanese. I tried to explain about all the food, clothing, radios, and automobiles in most homes in America. They seemed amazed, but I don't think they believed all I was saying. Having lived at the same level as these poor, starved people for so long, it was even hard for me to realize that a more comfortable life lay ahead of me. This tired old man and his obedient wife used words that I could not understand, but I could tell what they wanted me to know. They were sorry that we had to suffer as prisoners of their people, and that the Japanese people did not desire the war. They put these thoughts in so many ways that I was sure they were sincere. I believed they spoke for the many simple, down-trodden people of Japan. I should hate the Japanese people, but could only feel the deepest sympathy for them. While my life was about to start anew, theirs was to be a hard struggle to regain the little they once had. Why must so many suffer for the greed and ambition of so few?

Zincke and Johnson were wandering town looking for a drink of sake, but instead were invited to the Japanese couple's home. The couple was poor, having very little for themselves, yet sharing what they did have with these strangers. This event occurred in the middle of a larger-scale suspension of their everyday heuristic as prisoners of war (they were free and about to go home), so we can safely say that their everyday heuristic was also suspended in this encounter. It was also extraordinary and personally relevant in that he was in the house of people whose nation imprisoned him and was dialoguing with them.

This extraordinary event carried both positive (transcendent) and negative (anti-transcendent) markers. It was positive in that the couple expressed sorrow for their imprisonment, and assured them that the Japanese people did not desire the war. It was negative in that his experience with the Japanese people up to this point was brutally abusive. He

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 159.

established personal meaning for this event: “I believed they spoke for the many simple, down-trodden people of Japan. I should hate the Japanese people, but could only feel the deepest sympathy for them.” In a way, this event established extraordinary connections within and beyond himself, which he pegged with a moral question: “Why must so many suffer for the greed and ambition of so few?” By connecting with this poor Japanese couple (and by extension the Japanese people), he established coordinates in moral space when he gave meaning to this event.

“Hail, Hail, the Gang’s All Here”

On September 8, 1945, Zincke and his fellow prisoners were transferred by train to Yokohama, where they would be processed and sent back home to the United States. The welcome they received so moved Zincke that he was without words:¹⁴⁶

As we got off the train, the 1st Cavalry Division (Airborne) band played a rousing “Hail, Hail, the Gang’s All Here.” Then soldiers of the U.S. Army, ranging from three-star generals to privates, ran up to us and greeted us like long-lost brothers. I couldn’t even come up with a cheerful “hello” because I was choked up and on the verge of tears. But I didn’t feel so foolish when I noticed that my buddies were also having a hard time answering this wonderful welcome.

Again, as with the previous narrative fragment on the Japanese family, Zincke’s everyday heuristic was suspended as they experienced a transitional period between prisoner of war and repatriated Americans. This status will be assumed for this and the subsequent passage, which occurred approximately within the same time period. It was extraordinary and personally relevant (“Then soldiers of the US Army...ran up to us and greeted us like long-lost brothers. I was choked up and on the verge of tears”), and the welcome helped reestablish extraordinary ties within and beyond himself, especially as an American service member.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 160.

“Our first American meal”

Zincke’s first American meal since his imprisonment was also a transcendent moment, carrying markers for extraordinary meaning as he reprocessed his sense of self.¹⁴⁷

A short ride of a few miles took us to our first American meal. I heaped my tray with the delicious food but could only eat a few spoonfuls of the rich servings. From habit, I picked up my tray and headed for the door— I would eat it all later. But a sergeant spotted me and gently took the tray, saying, “You’re home now, soldier; there’s lots more where that came from. Anytime you get a little hungry, come back and we’ll fix you up.” I felt like a big, dumb recruit, but at the same time joyfully realized I was back where people are treated like human beings— not like animals.

Zincke, while one aspect of his “everyday heuristic” was suspended, that of being a prisoner, noted how another everyday heuristic was suspended by his encounter with the sergeant – the habit of taking any leftover food with him so he could eat it later when he got hungry again. The sergeant’s words also helped him make meaning of this encounter in a number of ways: a) he was home; b) the people there cared about his well-being; and c) he was back where people are treated like human beings (not like animals). By his realization of the meaning of the sergeant’s words, Zincke reestablished extraordinary ties with people and place (“home”), also plotting coordinates in moral space (“people are treated like human beings”).

Three sentences immediately after this passage confirm a more holistic sense of meaning of his account: “Thus I end my account of World War II service. The passage of over fifty years has made me more aware than ever of the countless blessings of freedom to which a citizen of the United States is entitled. May God strike me dead if I ever should forget to appreciate that freedom.”¹⁴⁸ Freedom, as a good, carried strong markers for transcendence for Zincke and his fellow memoirists, especially when restored after having been taken away.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

Conclusion

In some ways, Zincke's baseline for his "everyday heuristic" was much like his fellow memoirists at the Japanese-run camps. It included regular occurrences of brutality, loss of life, malnutrition, and medical neglect. Coping mechanisms included stealing, "sticking together," where prisoners looked out for each other in a variety of ways, and trading with others for goods. Zincke was also often sick or injured, having contracted beriberi, diphtheria, and severe diarrhea, in addition to injuring his legs and back in a variety of accidents or incidents.

Two of the events analyzed in this section carried both transcendent and anti-transcendent markers: his experience of God and the cherry trees towards the end of the war, and the time when he connected with a Japanese family shortly after their camp was liberated. His status as a prisoner in the first one (virtual slavery) and the Japanese family's status as citizens of the country that took him captive were markers that would normally inhibit meaning-making from occurring. However, in both cases, the transcendent markers (sense of God and beauty in the first, deep sympathy and compassion for the old couple in the second) outweighed the anti-transcendent ones, and Zincke ultimately established meaning for both events, resulting in extraordinary ties with God and others, and plotting coordinates in moral space with each event.

Two other events were primarily transcendent – the welcome at Yokohama and his experience of his first American meal after liberation. In both cases his everyday heuristic was already suspended due to the fact that they were transitioning between being liberated prisoners and repatriated Americans. The meaning he established for both events resulted in extraordinary ties within and beyond himself, returning him to a sense of being back "home," among "brothers," to being treated as a human being, and being free. Zincke's last words before his epilogue summed up his sense of meaning regarding the POW experience – a sense of gratitude

for “the countless blessings of freedom to which a citizen of the United States is entitled,” and the permanence and meaning of his appreciation for that freedom (“May God strike me dead if I should ever forget”).

Comparing Biggs, Gordon, and Zincke

The three memoirists in this section (Biggs, Gordon, and Zincke) experienced transcendence at times by their interaction with other human beings that carried extraordinary markers – beauty, kindness, or compassion. In all three cases, coordinates were plotted in moral space that guided their future actions. For example, Biggs’ vision of the women that were more familiar to him (white women) made him realize how lonely he was and how his loneliness could only be fulfilled with female companionship – he later married and had a family, for which his love was “deep and unconditional.”¹⁴⁹ Gordon’s experience of the kindness of people like Bill Standish and Cecil Fernandez and the cruelty of people like Verble Jones during his imprisonment helped him establish a certain norm, “exceptional men...must never be forgotten.” In the prologue to his memoir, he recalls the “heroes,” stating that “these are the men I enshrine with this book.” Zincke’s compassion for the sincere Japanese couple led him to ask the question, “Why must so many suffer for the greed and ambition of so few?”¹⁵⁰ Decades later he and other former prisoners of war filed a class-action lawsuit against several large Japanese companies, stating that these companies profited from their forced labor during the war, perhaps providing his answer to the question.

¹⁴⁹ “Chester Biggs, Jr. Obituary,” *Star News online*, accessed May 3, 2017, <http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/starnewsonline/obituary.aspx?n=chester-maxwell-biggs&pid=154964518>.

¹⁵⁰ Zincke, *Mitsui Madhouse: Memoir of a US Army Air Corps POW in World War II*, 159.

In all three accounts, the contemptible behavior of their captors laced certain extraordinary, personally relevant events with anti-transcendent markers. For example, Biggs was coerced to desecrate and destroy the graves of many rural Chinese families whose land the Japanese appropriated for various projects. These events took the route of “anti-transcendence,” or an anti-process of meaning-making, resulting in the severing of extraordinary ties within and beyond himself and disrupting how coordinates were mapped in moral space – hardening them, “grinding away” their finer emotions, making them more callous as time went on. Gordon’s experience with the “heartless actions” of his fellow American prisoners were what he remembered most fifty years later. To this group as a whole, he said, “I cannot extend my hand in friendship.” In Gordon’s case he transcended these experiences, creating an extraordinary connection within himself regarding these fellow American POWs, plotting coordinates in moral space to mark their significance, and establishing a norm for himself (not extend his hand in friendship). Zinke established meaning for how he was treated by his captors (like an animal) when he regained his freedom and had his first American meal and was cared for as a human being. Freedom was also incorporated as a meaningful concept with these anti-transcendent experiences of war and captivity. The permanence of his coordinates in moral space were clearly stated at the end of his last chapter: “May God strike me dead if I should ever forget.”

The three authors had different points of emphasis in their memoirs. Biggs appeared to be attracted to beauty (natural and feminine) in the midst or aftermath of their opposites (brutal treatment, hard labor, desecration of graves). Gordon’s profound sense of betrayal regarding his fellow American POWs was a bitter thread that ran through his narrative, yet he recognized kindness and goodness in others, in non-Americans and one American Bill Standish, who saved his life. Their kindness was contrasted with the heartlessness of most of his fellow American

POWs. Zincke's vantage point often included scenes in the hospital section, where he spent a considerable amount of time due to illness or injury. Yet he also experienced moments outside the hospital with the divine, sincerity (the Japanese couple), a sense of "home," and a return to dignity that made him more deeply appreciate his freedom. The meaning-making of these experiences, when successful, appeared to influence how they viewed both the transcendent and anti-transcendent events in their POW experiences and beyond.

Similarities and Differences across WWII Memoirs

Memoirs in this section were analyzed from POW accounts during World War II, in which the memoirists were either held by the Germans or by the Japanese. Together, the memoirists from the Japanese-run camps reported more severe everyday circumstances than those in the German-held camps. This is consistent with the findings that Neufeld and Watson, Jr. (2013) reported in their survey of POWs during the twentieth century, in which they confirm that Germany did uphold the Geneva Conventions, while Japan did not, although they signed the same treaty.¹⁵¹ However, in the cases of the German-held POWs, the everyday baseline varied by rank – Jefferson, an officer at the time of capture, was held at a different camp than Sirianni, who was enlisted. Jefferson reported better treatment than did Sirianni.

Transcendent experiences for which meaning was established were often marked by beauty, kindness, compassion, freedom regained, or homecomings that reunited them with their fellow countrymen and/or family and friends. Jefferson's homecoming was the only anti-transcendent homecoming recorded of all the World War II memoirists.

¹⁵¹ Neufeld and Watson, Jr. "A Brief Survey of POWs in Twentieth Century Wars."

Meaning-making, which I identified as a “black box” in my conceptual model, was originally designated as beyond the scope of my dissertation to analyze for each memoirist. I did not expect to get enough elaboration on how each author established meaning for their extraordinary experiences, but thought I could at least find evidence of: a) how meaning-making was triggered (self-relevant, extraordinary (positive or negative), and suspends one’s everyday heuristic); and b) certain outcomes that corresponded with either successful meaning-making (transcendence) or failure to make meaning (anti-transcendence). What I found was that some authors provided glimpses into their meaning-making in their narratives, while others did not.

For example, Jefferson wrote an explicit section called “What did it all mean?” in his memoir, in which he provided a holistic perspective of his meaning-making process. Gordon corresponded his loss of freedom to an existential crisis, not sure if he could survive it. Sirianni noted on several occasions how the church, its steeple, and its arch evolved as an enduring symbol of freedom for him and the other POWs, before and after their release, even decades later. Zinke explained to the reader how and why he felt compassion for the Japanese couple that invited him and Sgt. Johnson for some tea and food.

Stabilization of sense of self and extraordinary ties within and beyond the self were present as outcomes of successful meaning-making for the memoirists. Jefferson’s memoir stands out as the one with greatest accent on how his sense of self evolved and stabilized over time (African American and Tuskegee Airman). Extraordinary connections within and beyond the self, often resulting in coordinates mapped in moral space, were most often found in connection with their experience of beauty, God, the kindness or compassion of other human beings, and liberation. Zinke was the only memoirist who explicitly noted a transcendent experience that involved a “feeling of being near God.” Examples of how extraordinary

connections within and beyond the self resulted in establishing coordinates in moral space can be found in Gordon's memoir, in which he stated that exceptional men (like Bill Standish) must never be forgotten, and his unwillingness to forgive the "heartless American" POWs who often preyed upon the weaker members of the camp.

In rare cases, some memoirists also described anti-transcendent outcomes – destabilization of one's sense of self or the severing of connections within and beyond the self, which could result in a loss of orientation in moral space. Biggs, for example, when forced to destroy and desecrate the graves of local families to make room for the Japanese-run construction projects, noted how these events hardened them, "grinding away" their finer emotions, making them more callous as time went on. Gordon noted the increasing rift between him and his fellow American POWs after witnessing their bullying and predatory behavior. At one point he mentioned that he was "ashamed to be American" when he recalled Verble Jones, an American prisoner who bullied other prisoners.

I also analyzed two idiosyncratic narrative fragments in Jefferson's memoir, because the events were self-relevant, extraordinary, and appeared to suspend his everyday heuristic, but no mention was made of whether Jefferson attempted to make meaning or failed to make meaning of these events. One confirmed his identity as a "Red Tail" (Tuskegee Airman) and the other was an answer to his curiosity about Dachau (the ovens were still warm). He did mention that he was "haunted" by what he saw at Dachau, but made no elaboration on what that meant for him. This does not mean that there was no meaning making. It simply means that it was not possible to track any consequences of this sense of being haunted in a way that connected to his sense of self or his extraordinary ties within and beyond himself.

Vietnam War Memoirs

This section will track transcendence and its inputs and outputs for three memoirists: John S. McCain, III, Leo K. Thorsness, and James “Nick” Rowe. For each memoir, I have analyzed a minimum of five narrative fragments, being mindful to include a mix of events that were tagged as transcendent, anti-transcendent, or both. In some cases, meaning was coupled with sacred objects like wedding rings or flags, or with ritual and worship, like “having church” or reciting an Our Father together, or personal prayer.

I have divided this analysis of the POW memoirs of the Vietnam War into four parts. The first part examines five kinds of events in McCain’s memoir, which exegetes five narrative fragments. There was a mix of transcendent and anti-transcendent events, as well as those events with both anti-transcendent and transcendent markers. One event described an interrogator’s offer to him of freedom, two events address his “breaking point” and soon after it, another captures a memory of prayer “in times of trial,” which describes repetitions of meaning-making in anti-transcendent moments, and the last describes the meaning of communicating with prisoners.

The second part of this analysis examines Thorsness’ memoir, in which transcendent and anti-transcendent events fell into five categories, covering a total of eight events. One instance of meaning-making takes a memory from his pre-enlistment years and establishes extraordinary connections within and beyond himself. A second describes his “memory box(es)”, which provide a glimpse into his “black box” of meaning-making. A third addresses his “breaking point,” a fourth type refers to sacred objects in two different events: his wedding ring and the American flag. The fifth type addresses his experience of prayer and ritual, also with three events – two that had both transcendent and anti-transcendent tags – the first when he was sent to “Skid

Rowe,” and the second was the “Our Father” prayer by the prisoners, which they knew would result in torture. The third event occurred very shortly after his release (receiving communion from his brother John), carrying transcendent markers.

The third part of this section analyzes Nick Rowe’s memoir, which examines a total of seven narrative fragments: four events plus “outputs” of a particular form of meaning-making: poems. I will analyze three of those poems in their own section, which breaks the sequencing or the order in which Rowe presented all seven fragments. Given that the poems are more “output” than “input,” I chose to include them in their own section. The first event describes Dave’s “last day,” in which Rowe reports listening to him die. The second event describes the release of two fellow POWs (Dan and Jim). The third event reflects on his experience of Communist doctrine in contrast with his American identity, and the fourth event describes his homecoming.

The last part of the analysis will discuss similarities and differences between the memoirists’ experiences of transcendence. For example, both McCain and Thorsness highlighted their “breaking point” as personally significant, negative experiences, which they had to process deeply to establish meaning. All three Vietnam POW memoirists refer to events around prayer or connecting with God as meaning-making conduits. Rowe stands out as different from the other two in his generation of poetry and disclosure of the dreams that influenced his poetry. These and other similarities and differences will be discussed in this last section.

John S. McCain, III

John McCain was shot down on October 26, 1967, during his 23rd mission.¹⁵² He spent about 5.5 years in captivity. McCain's memoir is the briefest of all the memoirs analyzed – about 12,250 words. It was also published with the shortest time elapsed from his release – about two months. This section will examine five narrative fragments. The first is “The Cat’s” offer of freedom, something that McCain admits he had to think about for a long time before responding. The second and third fragments cover his breaking point and two weeks after his captors let him rest; the third fragment shows how he was able to recover from his breaking point and resist his captors moving forward. The fourth fragment covers McCain's recollection of prayer as a help in times of trial, and the last fragment discusses communications between McCain and other prisoners.

Given the brevity of McCain's memoir compared with the others in the study, I looked at his repetitions of words that signified routine or “everyday” events that were likely to be part of his everyday heuristic. Examples of the “everyday” in his memoir are often preceded by the word “usually” in his memoir, of which there are five repetitions. Two of the repetitions of “usually” were about bath time – where McCain notes that his captor “would usually take me out last...there was usually no water left” by the time he got there, so he would simply stand there for his allotted five minutes and be taken back to his room. The third repetition of “usually” was embedded in his post-breaking point narrative: “They usually didn’t do that [let prisoners rest] with guys when they had them really busted.” The fourth repetition occurs when he describes operations at “Hanoi Hilton”: “Heartbreak Hotel is also there – that’s the first place people were usually taken for their initial interrogations and then funneled out to other camps.” The last

¹⁵² McCain, “John McCain, Prisoner of War: A First-Person Account.”

repetition describes the arrangement of “Camp Unity” area: “There were seven large rooms, usually with a concrete pedestal in the center.”¹⁵³ There were zero repetitions of the terms “every day” and its variations, and only one occurrence of “daily,” which described their hygiene routine (emptying toilet buckets).

An offer of freedom

About eight months into his captivity, an interrogator nicknamed “The Cat” by the prisoners made him an offer of freedom. The text follows below:¹⁵⁴

Suddenly "The Cat" said to me, "Do you want to go home?" I was astonished, and I tell you frankly that I said that I would have to think about it. I went back to my room, and I thought about it for a long time. At this time I did not have communication with the camp senior ranking officer, so I could get no advice. I was worried whether I could stay alive or not, because I was in rather bad condition. I had been hit with a severe case of dysentery, which kept on for about a year and a half. I was losing weight again.

But I knew that the Code of Conduct says, "You will not accept parole or amnesty," and that "you will not accept special favors." For somebody to go home earlier is a special favor. There's no other way you can cut it. I went back to him three nights later. He asked again, "Do you want to go home?" I told him "No." He wanted to know why, and I told him the reason. I said that Alvarez [first American captured] should go first, then enlisted men and that kind of stuff.

"The Cat" told me that President Lyndon Johnson had ordered me home. He handed me a letter from my wife, in which she had said, "I wished that you had been one of those three who got to come home." Of course, she had no way to understand the ramifications of this. "The Cat" said that the doctors had told him that I could not live unless I got medical treatment in the United States. We went through this routine and still I told him "No." Three nights later we went through it all over again.

On the morning of the Fourth of July, 1968, which happened to be the same day that my father took over as commander in chief of U. S. Forces in the Pacific, I was led into another quiz room. "The Rabbit" and "The Cat" were sitting there. I walked in and sat down, and "The Rabbit" said, "Our senior wants to know your final answer." "My final answer is the same. It's 'No.'" "That is your final answer?" "That is my final answer."

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

We know that McCain's everyday heuristic was suspended because of how he describes his reaction: he was both "astonished" and he had to think about it "for a long time." The offer of freedom had primarily anti-transcendent qualities because the offer was made in a way, which if taken, would cause him to violate the Code of Conduct, which included the directive not to accept "special favors." To make matters worse the interrogators informed him that the President ordered him home, and they gave him a letter from his wife that explicitly indicated her wish that he was "one of those three who got to go home." The potential for fracturing or disintegrating connections within and beyond himself was very high if he accepted the offer.

To explain further, all the consequences would be negative: a) he would be in violation the Code of Conduct; b) it would give interrogators greater leverage against the remaining prisoners; and c) even though he was told that he would not have to sign any statements or confessions, he knew that if he was at the entrance of the plane and then was told to sign a statement, he said, "at that point, I doubt that I could have resisted, even though I felt very strong at the time."¹⁵⁵ Potentially anti-transcendent outcomes would include severing or disintegration of extraordinary ties within and beyond himself, both in his orientation in moral space and with regard to his fellow POWs.

He was offered this freedom not once but five times. The first time he asked for time to think about it. He thought "for a long time" about what it would mean to accept the offer. After this process of meaning-making, the result was a more consistent and stabilized response to the remaining four offers: "No." Not only did he want to avoid violating the Code of Conduct, the "primary thing" that he considered was that "I had no right to go ahead of men like Alvarez, who had been there three years before I 'got killed' – that's what we say instead of 'before I got shot

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

down,’ because in a way becoming a prisoner in North Vietnam was like being killed.”¹⁵⁶ Two outcomes appear to have emerged from this significant, personally relevant, anti-transcendent event: a) extraordinary connections within himself, providing coordinates in moral space; and b) extraordinary connections beyond himself, such as his fellow prisoners, especially Alvarez. Meaning was successfully established for this anti-transcendent event, which resulted in these extraordinary connections within and beyond himself.

“Every man has his breaking point”

Although McCain refers to his “breaking point” almost five months into captivity, he had previously broken the Code of Conduct about four days into his capture by offering military information in exchange for medical attention. However, he did not process this earlier infraction as a breaking point. His motivation for offering this initial exchange of information was based on what he remembered of a fellow service member who ejected from his plane and broke his thigh, dying from shock. As he remembered this incident, he “realized that a very similar thing was happening to me. When I saw it, I said to the guard, ‘O.K., get the officer...I’ll give you military information if you will take me to the hospital.’”¹⁵⁷ From McCain’s narrative, it appears that his captors found out that his father was an admiral and decided to take him to the hospital. McCain never mentioned whether he disclosed any information in that episode. There was also no mention of remorse, sense of conflict, or evidence suggesting deep processing about the offer he made, and as a result, that first event was not analyzed. “Breaking point” for McCain seemed less about violating the Code and more about how he was reduced to “animal”. Below is McCain’s account of his “breaking point,” the second time he broke the Code of Conduct.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

About a month and a half after he turned down those offers of freedom, he was “set up for some very severe treatment which lasted for the next year and a half.”¹⁵⁸ In the event below he describes a four-to-five-day ordeal, during which time he was beaten, bounced from pillar to post, and bound at night with ropes. It took four days of daily beatings every two to three hours, rebreaking his arm and cracking his ribs before reaching the “lowest point of my 5 ½ years in North Vietnam. The passage reads (underlining is my notation):¹⁵⁹

They took me out of my room to "Slopehead," who said, "You have violated all the camp regulations. You're a black criminal. You must confess your crimes." I said that I wouldn't do that, and he asked, "Why are you so disrespectful of guards?" I answered, "Because the guards treat me like an animal." When I said that, the guards, who were all in the room—about 10 of them—really laid into me. They bounced me from pillar to post, kicking and laughing and scratching. After a few hours of that, ropes were put on me and I sat that night bound with ropes. Then I was taken to a small room. For punishment they would almost always take you to another room where you didn't have a mosquito net or a bed or any clothes.

For the next four days, I was beaten every two to three hours by different guards. My left arm was broken again and my ribs were cracked. They wanted a statement saying that I was sorry for the crimes that I had committed against North Vietnamese people and that I was grateful for the treatment that I had received from them. This was the paradox—so many guys were so mistreated to get them to say they were grateful. But this is the Communist way. I held out for four days.

Finally, I reached the lowest point of my 5½ years in North Vietnam. I was at the point of suicide, because I saw that I was reaching the end of my rope. I said, O.K., I'll write for them. They took me up into one of the interrogation rooms, and for the next 12 hours we wrote and rewrote. The North Vietnamese interrogator, who was pretty stupid, wrote the final confession, and I signed it. It was in their language, and spoke about black crimes, and other generalities. It was unacceptable to them.

But I felt just terrible about it. I kept saying to myself, "Oh, God, I really didn't have any choice." I had learned what we all learned over there: Every man has his breaking point. I had reached mine.

McCain created an inclusio that brackets the extremely violent, personally relevant event from beginning to end, with two words: “four days.” An inclusio is a literary device in which the writer brackets a section of text with a word or phrase at the beginning and end of the section.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

This device is often found in biblical literature, especially Judeo-Christian scripture, but it is also found in other forms of rhetoric. Inclusios may have an interpretive key, a message or lesson through which the bracketed passage can be viewed. McCain's inclusio contained an interpretive key: the recognition of a "paradox" – that is, "so many guys were so mistreated to get them to say that they were grateful." He identifies the experience as highly negative ("I reached the lowest point of my 5 ½ years in North Vietnam"), which also carries markers for anti-transcendence ("I was at the point of suicide," and "Every man has his breaking point. I had reached mine."). This passage, if taken alone, does not necessarily offer any evidence that he transcended the experience. In fact, two anti-transcendent outcomes appear to have manifested here: a) destabilization of his sense of self ("I was at the point of suicide," and in the next passage as he recalls the beating/torture, "I was reduced to an animal"); and b) disintegration of extraordinary ties within himself, which included his moral space ("I just felt terrible...I really didn't have any choice."). However, in the passage immediately following his "breaking point" episode, the evidence of transcendence becomes more apparent.

Right after his breaking point

McCain, having reached his breaking point, may not have been able to transcend the experience if not for another event, which carried both transcendent and anti-transcendent markers, and helped him recover. His captors let him rest for a couple of weeks. The text reads:¹⁶⁰

Then the "gooks" made a very serious mistake, because they let me go back and rest for a couple of weeks. They usually didn't do that with guys when they had them really busted. I think it concerned them that my arm was broken, and they had messed up my leg. I had been reduced to an animal during this period of beating and torture. My arm was so painful I couldn't get up off the floor. With the dysentery, it was a very unpleasant time.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

Thank God they let me rest for a couple of weeks. Then they called me up again and wanted something else. I don't remember what it was now—it was some kind of statement. This time I was able to resist. I was able to carry on. They couldn't "bust" me again.

We can still see evidence of anti-transcendence outputs, like destabilizing his sense of self that would have helped him identify as human (he “had been reduced to an animal”), but the event of “rest” also carries markers for transcendence, in that this rest would enable him to recover enough to recalibrate his sense of self. If stabilization of one’s sense of self enables the person to more firmly root him or herself in a response to the question, “What am I?” then destabilization of one’s sense of self will overturn that rootedness. Being “reduced to an animal” could be an example of how destabilization of one’s sense of self presented in McCain’s text. After he rested, though, he identifies a certain reconnect with and stabilization in his sense of self: “This time I was able to resist. I was able to carry on. They couldn’t ‘bust’ me again.” His use of the term “bust” appears to be a reference to his “breaking point,” which are also found in close proximity to his self-portrayal as “animal,” and this pattern occurs in both the passage about his breaking point and the one immediately following. His sense of self stabilized.

If extraordinary connections within and beyond the self, in space-time, gives the person coordinates in moral space – and allows the person to draw from those coordinates in future situations, then being “busted” or “broken,” in McCain’s sense, fractures or disintegrates one’s ability to make meaning of the events being experienced, severing those connections. The result is some kind of interior (moral) breakdown. McCain noted this with significant inner conflict: “I felt just terrible about it. I kept saying to myself, ‘Oh, God, I really didn't have any choice.’” However, after the event of rest, he was “able to resist,” to “carry on.” He reestablished those connections within such that “they couldn’t ‘bust’ me again.” The moral coordinates were re-established.

On prayer – “it helped”

Prayer is mentioned as a meaning-making mechanism by all three Vietnam War POW memoirists, in different ways. In about 135 words, McCain describes how prayer sustained him in times of trial:¹⁶¹

Prayer: "I Was Sustained in Times of Trial"

I was finding that prayer helped. It wasn't a question of asking for superhuman strength or for God to strike the North Vietnamese dead. It was asking for moral and physical courage, for guidance and wisdom to do the right thing. I asked for comfort when I was in pain, and sometimes I received relief. I was sustained in many times of trial. When the pressure was on, you seemed to go one way or the other. Either it was easier for them to break you the next time, or it was harder. In other words, if you are going to make it, you get tougher as time goes by. Part of it is just a transition from our way of life to that way of life.

Prayer, while having transcendent qualities (“asking for moral and physical courage,” “guidance and wisdom to do the right thing,” or being “sustained in times of trial”) was engaged in response to anti-transcendent events, or events that were personally relevant and extraordinary, and negative (pain, times of trial, pressure being “on”). He appears to identify two outcomes that correspond with the “outputs” of transcendence when meaning is successfully established. The first is found in his subtitle “I was sustained in times of trial,” which worked against being “broken,” potentially losing one’s sense of self. By his statement, “I was sustained in many times of trial,” he confirms the outcomes in the previous narrative fragment – they couldn’t “bust” him again, and he was “able to resist,” to “carry on.” His mentions that his request in prayer was for “moral and physical courage, for guidance and wisdom to do the right thing,” which points to extraordinary connections within himself, a second kind of outcome. The result of this kind of extraordinary connection would be the establishment of coordinates in moral space, allowing

¹⁶¹ Ibid

him to draw from those coordinates in future situations, particularly those that might be morally challenging.

We should also note what he says that he did *not* ask for: “superhuman strength” or “for God to strike the North Vietnamese dead.” He was not looking for the development of something external to himself. He was asking for a stronger, more stable sense of self (not “breaking”), and extraordinary connections within and beyond himself, via God’s “guidance and wisdom to do the right thing.” Prayer appears to be both event and method of establishing meaning. Prayer, as described by McCain, was a conscious, deliberate act, and the event occasioned by prayer might have had to suspend his everyday heuristic. I suggest this because in his “baseline” for everyday experiences, there was no mention of prayer as response to those events.

Communication – making connections beyond the self

McCain also described the importance of communication as a way of making meaning of one’s situation, resulting in extraordinary connections with others beyond himself:¹⁶²

When they caught us communicating, they'd take severe reprisals. I was caught a lot of times. One reason was because I'm not too smart, and the other reason was because I lived alone. If you live with somebody else you have somebody helping you out, helping you survive.

But I was never going to stop. Communication with your fellow prisoners was of the utmost value—the difference between being able to resist and not being able to resist. You may get some argument from other prisoners on that. A lot depends on the individual. Some men are much more self-sufficient than others.

Communication primarily served to keep up morale. We would risk getting beat up just to tell a man that one of his friends had gotten a letter from home. But it was also valuable to establish a chain of command in our camps, so our senior officers could give us advice and guidance.

Communication in McCain’s experience was a way of establishing meaning for prisoners, individually and often collectively. Communication, he said, “was of the utmost value—the

¹⁶² Ibid.

difference between being able to resist and not being able to resist.” He also acknowledged that communication produced an effect: a protective factor against being able to resist or not able to resist. However, the efficacy varied in its effects, depending on the individual (“Some men are much more self-sufficient than others”). The idea of “being able to resist” corresponds to those extraordinary connections within oneself that provides coordinates in moral space – guiding the person to “do the right thing,” as he mentioned in his section on prayer. Extraordinary connections were formed beyond the self when communication was established between prisoners, in that “you have somebody helping you out, helping you survive,” and it was valuable “to establish a chain of command in our camps, so our senior officers could give us advice and guidance.” Communication between prisoners in isolation. i.e., solitary confinement, would have stronger implications of those connections.

The idea of “survival,” which he mentions in the fourth sentence, appears to be a more existential issue, corresponding to stabilization or destabilization of one’s sense of self. I propose that communication, according to McCain, helped protect against being “busted” or reaching a “breaking point.” I make this connection based on the proximity of being “able to resist” to “they couldn’t ‘bust’ me again” in the passage that followed his breaking point, suggesting one was the antonym of the other.

It appears here that communication, like prayer, was both an event and a method of establishing meaning between prisoners. It carried transcendent markers, promoting meaning-making that would result in stabilization of one’s sense of self and helping form extraordinary connections within and beyond the self, and anti-transcendent markers, carrying the risk of pain, beating, or being “broken”. Yet McCain derived such significant meaning from communicating that he would take the risk of “getting beat” to connect with his fellow POWs, in part because it

helped him survive, in part because it affirmed those extraordinary ties within and beyond himself as a person.

Conclusion

I have highlighted five kinds of events in McCain's memoir, which varied in their effects after he processed them. The first kind of event, in which "The Cat" asked McCain if he wanted to go home, essentially offering him freedom with conditions, was repeated five times, over the course of about a week. This offer of freedom had primarily anti-transcendent qualities because the offer was made in a way, which if taken, would cause him to violate the Code of Conduct, which included the directive not to accept "special favors". The Cat's first offer suspended his everyday heuristic – he was "astonished" and had to think about "for a long time." However, once he fully assessed the meaning of what an acceptance of such an offer implied, his response was consistent: "No." He had established extraordinary connections within and beyond himself, which had moral implications, such as considering the status of fellow POWs that were there longer than he was, especially Alvarez.

The second event happened only once: his "breaking point." We know that this was outside his everyday heuristic by both the rhetorical structure (inclusio bracketed by "four days"), by the interpretive key within that inclusio (the "paradox"), and by the use of superlatives to characterize it ("I reached the lowest point of my 5 ½ years in North Vietnam."). We also know it had anti-transcendent markers ("very severe treatment," "I was beaten every two to three hours by different guards"). Two outcomes emerged from this event, particularly since the paradox he identified could not be resolved. Those outcomes were: a) destabilization of his sense of self (reduced to animal); b) severing or disintegration of connections within himself ("I just

felt terrible...I really didn't have any choice.”). The third event is also related to his breaking point – the period of “rest” – which carried both markers for transcendence and anti-transcendence. Anti-transcendent markers included his reduction to “animal”, which could have further destabilized his sense of self if he was unable to attach meaning to this event of “rest.” It also carried transcendent markers – the “rest” was good. He states that when he rested, he was able to resist, and said that “they couldn't ‘bust’ me again.” His sense of self stabilized, and his moral coordinates (connections within himself) were re-established.

Prayer, the fourth type of event, likely happened numerous times, although McCain does not provide time-space coordinates for each instance. He discussed prayer about 40% of the way into his memoir, identifying it as a help, sustaining him “in many times of trial.” Prayer had transcendent qualities, and was acted upon in response to anti-transcendent events (pain, weakness). He also seemed to associate prayer with the ability to “get tougher as time goes by,” allowing him to resist his captors and not “break” again. The things he says he asked for also indicate that he was looking for a way to stabilize himself and establish extraordinary connections within (“do the right thing”) and beyond himself (God's “guidance and wisdom”).

The last type of event, communication with fellow POWs, was for McCain “of the utmost value,” making the difference between “being able to resist and not being able to resist.” It also helped keep up morale among fellow prisoners. Communicating was very risky. Getting caught meant “severe reprisals,” usually beatings. Making these events, then, required POWs to suspend their everyday heuristic and assess the risks of getting caught before acting. Yet, McCain said he was never going to stop.

Both prayer and communication appear to be simultaneously “event” and a method of establishing meaning, often accompanied by something anti-transcendent (pain, weakness, risk

of getting beaten or tortured). Prayer, interiorly expressed, helped McCain stabilize his sense of self and helped him establish extraordinary connections within (“physical and moral courage,” doing “the right thing”) and beyond himself (asking God for something).

Meaning-making was paralyzed for him at his breaking point, but rest, prayer, and his connections with fellow POWs helped establish meaning of his experiences in captivity. We see that his breaking point, at the time when meaning-making was paralyzed, resulted in a destabilization of his sense of self (reduced to “animal”). However, once he was given rest, his moral coordinates were re-established and they could not “bust” him again.

Leo K. Thorsness

I will track five kinds of events, or a total of eight narrative fragments, from Thorsness’ memoir, in the order he discussed them. His memoir was not constructed in chronological order as was McCain’s; it was organized thematically, where memories are accessed out of sequence at different points in the story.

A “baseline” of the everyday was described in his chapters entitled, “A Day in the Life of” and “Dinnertime.” A daily “routine” was organized: “They had a routine centered around a wakeup gong, emptying your rusty bucket (toilet) into a sewer line, getting two thin meals and three daily cigarettes.”¹⁶³ Their day started around 6 am, when the guards would give each prisoner 3 cigarettes, and essentially finish with the evening meal at 4:30 pm. These moments would have eventually been processed using an “everyday heuristic” that would make sense of the pathological normalcy in which they lived, once prisoners were acclimated to their condition.

¹⁶³ Thorsness, *Surviving Hell: A POW’s Journey*, 39.

During the Vietnam War, Leo Thorsness noted the regularity of getting beaten. Being caught “tapping” (communicating using tap codes) with fellow POWs “usually meant a beating.”¹⁶⁴ If a POW “refused to bow, or bowed wrong, it meant a beating. The same routine had to be followed each time the door closed.”¹⁶⁵ The “routine” of torture changed between the first three years, which was a more regular occurrence, and the last three years, which was less frequent: “Once we were in the big cells, it took about a month to settle into a routine in which torture was the exception rather than the norm; in which talking aloud was permitted and no subjects were forbidden.”¹⁶⁶

In contrast with McCain’s memoir, which was published about two months after his release in 1973, Thorsness’ memoir was published nearly 35 years after his release in 2008. He had much more time to establish meaning for his experiences, and his memoir is organized in a way that reveals how he made meaning. Towards the end of Chapter 2 (at the time of his capture) he remarks on the transformative nature of what would be a six-year POW experience: “It was the beginning of an ordeal that would brutalize me, and, paradoxically for anyone who didn’t share the unique experience of the POWs, also allow me to become a better and fuller person.”¹⁶⁷ Thorsness was able to successfully establish meaning for an anti-transcendent event (capture) that resulted in stabilizing his sense of self (“become a better and fuller person”). He appears to follow this pattern of meaning-making for all five types of events.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 36.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 43.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 89.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 14.

Previous experience of hardship

The first event is his memory of previous experience of hardship growing up on a farm, which happened very close to his capture. Shortly after his capture, he recalls wondering if he could survive, “not just physically, but mentally and morally. Would I break? And if I did, would the failure stay with me forever?”¹⁶⁸ These questions touch on his sense of self and his orientation in moral space, two potential outcomes that could end positively or negatively, depending on whether he was successful at establishing meaning. He did not have an “everyday” heuristic to process his capture, and his questions reflect this state of mind. Immediately after this reflection on the questions that “swarmed into my head,” he recalled his childhood experiences, which eventually provided a foundation for fighting adversity.¹⁶⁹

Born into the Depression in 1932, I was a Minnesota farm kid from what always seemed to me a typical family. Mother and father, older sister and brother. My parents didn’t get past the eighth grade; their education came from working the land on a farm near the town of Walnut Grove where they settled after getting married.

My dad was not much of a talker, but he was a good worker and I learned from that. He believed in the American Dream and was ambitious. Even as a young farmer with his own fields to till, he hired himself out to work for others, digging potatoes and picking corn by hand. When my brother John and I were old enough, dad bought a hay baler and converted a 1932 Chevy coupe into a tractor to pull it. We baled alfalfa for other farmers; it was hard and itchy work.

Later on I would discover that we had been poor— working hard to scratch out an existence. We defeated the Depression one day at a time. Spread-eagled on that rough bamboo floor, I told myself that I would have to fight captivity the same way.

In Thorsness’ reflection, what was once experienced as “everyday” (“typical”) in the past suddenly became an extraordinary connection for him as he processed this anti-transcendent event of being captured. The hardship he and his family endured and overcame during the Depression would inoculate him against the hardship of captivity. His connection with his

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 15.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 15 – 16.

experiences growing up was reinforced to combat and make sense of the anti-transcendent event of his capture.

The “memory room”

After his reflection on how his upbringing in the midst of adversity equipped him to fight captivity with the same spirit, Thorsness identified extraordinary connections that he had beyond himself: “There was no question in that hut about what truly mattered to me: family, faith, and friends. Family was constantly— almost obsessively— on my mind in those first hours: my parents, sister and brother, but most of all my wife and daughter.”¹⁷⁰ Again through his prose, he was able to describe his “black box” of meaning-making. Although he was physically bound into his pain (an anti-transcendent event), he elaborated on how he escaped its potentially destructive effects:¹⁷¹

I was physically bound— bound into my pain, so to speak. My mind was my only escape. I built a memory room in those first hours of imprisonment. It wasn't fancy. It was a lot like the tree house I built in our farm grove as a seventh grader. I used the old lumber piled behind our barn, adding a crude door and tin sheets from a torn-down hen house for the roof. I sawed a few boards and two-by-fours and nailed in a couple crude shelves. It was a perfectly serviceable memory room.

I used the old egg crates we kept in the barn to store my memories. Three crates were labeled Family, Faith, and Fun. Soon I added another, for Friends. So much of my life involved airplanes that I added a fifth crate: Flying.

Thorsness describes how he built his “memory room,” using materials that he found around his home. He refers back to his “memory box(es)” or “memory room” twice more in that chapter noting that important lessons “vividly lived” in his memory room’s boxes.¹⁷² He also developed priorities for his memory boxes, by “passion”. His first passion was Gaylee (his wife), and his

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 16.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 16 – 17.

¹⁷² Ibid, 19 – 20.

other passion was “flying”. His word repetitions alone confirm this prioritization – Gaylee’s name was repeated 45 times in the body of his memoir, and “fly(ing)” was repeated 38 times. These strong ties within and beyond himself (connections to sense of home and with other people) were maintained as he pushed through the personal experience of extraordinary pain.

Breaking point and after

Like McCain, Thorsness also recalls his “breaking point,” which he defined as the time he went “beyond name, rank, serial number, and date of birth,”¹⁷³ referencing the Geneva Convention, which was referenced seven pages earlier on his way to an interrogation: “As I passed Harry’s door, he hollered, ‘Geneva Convention, Leo. Hold out.’ I shouted back: ‘Do my best’”.¹⁷⁴ Unlike McCain, however, his description of the initial effects of this anti-transcendent “breaking point” event was much more focused on moral disintegration than on reduction to a non-human (“animal” in McCain’s words) state (*italics is my own notation*):¹⁷⁵

When I broke— when I went beyond name, rank, serial number, and date of birth— it was the lowest point in all my six years of captivity. When floating down in my parachute, I believed I failed my family. If I died when I hit the ground, they might never know what happened to me. I also felt that I had failed my profession by allowing myself to be shot down in the first place.

But these feelings were small in comparison to what I experienced *when I broke* under torture. I had friends who were already in the POW system. I knew they must have emerged from the same horrific torture that had broken me with their honor intact. But I had failed. Strapped on a slab, I tried to cry. But I was past tears. If I ever saw my fellow POWs, I wouldn’t be able to hold my head up.

After eighteen days, they pulled me out of solitary in Heartbreak — along with a naval pilot who had been shot down two weeks after I was, Ev Southwick. They moved us to the Zoo and pushed us into a cell with Jim Hiteshew. Jim, badly injured, was lying on the center of three bed boards. We said hello and told him our names: Ev adding that he was Navy. I said that I was Air Force out of Takhli Air Base in Thailand. Jim, almost entirely covered in a cast, said “Hi, Leo, I’m Jim Hiteshew. We knew each other at Takhli.” We had both changed so much in six weeks we didn’t recognize each other. Jim

¹⁷³ Ibid, 30.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 23.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 30 – 31.

was an Air Force major shot down six weeks before I was. He had ejected at the bottom of a dive run doing about 600 knots, breaking both legs and one arm so badly that the Vietnamese had almost let him die in the field. But he had refused to give up and they had reluctantly brought him in, putting him in close to a full body cast covering both legs, his chest, the lower half of his back, and one arm. They left a small opening so he could defecate and urinate. Jim needed help to survive.

Ev looked me over and said, "You're in bad shape. We've got to get you back on your feet so we can both help Jim." I immediately began to tell them I had failed. As soon as they knew what I was talking about, Jim said roughly, "Knock it off, Leo. Don't you know?" "Know what?"

"That everyone who goes through that type of interrogation has one of two things happen: either they broke or died— some did both." There was— and there still is— no way for me to express my absolute euphoria at hearing these words. I was not a failure. I was average and happy to be so.

Once more it is clear that his "everyday heuristic" was suspended. The use of a superlative ("it was the lowest point in all my six years of captivity") and the magnitude of his sense of shame ("if I ever saw my fellow POWs, I wouldn't be able to hold my head up") provide those anti-transcendent markers that this was a personally relevant, significant, and highly negative event, for which he was initially unable to establish meaning.

Rather than encapsulate the experience with an *inclusio*, Thorsness developed a progression with the words, "when I broke." The first part of this progression briefly defines the event (going beyond the four items permitted for disclosure in the Geneva Convention), and tags it as personal, extraordinary, and negative ("it was the lowest point in all my six years of captivity"). The second part of the progression compares the smallness of the feelings of failure he had when first captured to the feeling of failure after he broke, especially in comparison to the other POWs, his friends, who "emerged from the same horrific torture...with their honor intact."

Meaning is not successfully established until he emerges from solitary confinement 18 days later and is placed with two other American POWs – Ev Southwick and Jim Hiteshew. After they introduced each other, and noticing how badly Jim was injured, Thorsness immediately confessed his "breaking point," which the other two recognized. Jim corrects

Thorsness' self-perception with new knowledge: "Everyone who goes through that type of interrogation has one of two things happen: either they broke or died – some did both." The common occurrence of "breaking" as a consequence of the brutality of the interrogation stabilizes Thorsness' sense of himself ("I was not a failure. I was average and happy to be so."). He also formed extraordinary connections with the other POWs after the meaning of "breaking" under torture was successfully established.

Sacred object #1 – Ring

Thorsness mentioned two sacred objects that held significant meaning for him, either as reminders of a special day that was ritually celebrated, such as a wedding, or as a conduit to something transcendental, such as the American flag. The first one that he mentioned was his wedding ring. The ring was connected to his first "passion" – Gaylee, his wife:¹⁷⁶

Most POWs were able to keep their wedding rings until they arrived at the Hanoi Hilton, where, if not given up voluntarily, they were pulled off by the guards. Mine was a simple white gold band that had only once been off in the 14 years Gaylee and I had been married— during surgery. I felt it was worth a fight. After knocking me down, two guards forced my fist open but still could not remove the ring, which had grown into my finger. A short time later another guard came into the interrogation room with a large knife and said, "You give the ring, or you give the finger."

With as much courage as I could muster I said, "I keep my ring." I won very few battles as a POW, but this was one of them. We have now been married for 53 years, and I still have my wedding band and all ten fingers.

The anti-transcendent event can be described as the guards' attempt to separate Thorsness from the ring, which was a personal relic of his connection with Gaylee. His resistance (and their failure to separate him from it) demonstrated the significant meaning that had been established with the ring. The violence, the knife, and the threat of losing one of his fingers would have suspended his "everyday heuristic." Furthermore, he had to muster "as much courage as I could"

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 39.

to defy his captors. The strength of his connection with Gaylee, who was thousands of miles away, was accentuated by his “winning” that battle as a POW. The last sentence, which ended the description of that event, affirmed how he remained extraordinarily connected with his wife long after his release.

Prayer, ritual, God

Between his mention of the first sacred object (the ring) and the second sacred object (the American flag), he discussed the significance of prayer in captivity. He prayed for physical and mental strength to endure, and he also prayed for his family. His request for fortitude might be compared to a request for constancy, or stability in his sense of self. To elaborate, a Merriam-Webster synonym for fortitude is “constancy,”¹⁷⁷ or “steadfastness of mind under duress.”¹⁷⁸ His words follow in the brief excerpt below, shortly after he was sent to “Skid Row,” where he was locked in solitary confinement:¹⁷⁹

I prayed hard. “Lord, I need your help and your comfort. I pray you will provide me the physical and mental strength to endure and to someday be free and with my family. And Lord, I pray for my wife and daughter. Give them peace and comfort, and please let them know they are forever in my mind— Amen.” Prayer would be a big part of my life in solitary.

Praying “hard” suggested something outside the “everyday heuristic.” To provide more context about this passage, the time/place was the day he was sent to “Skid Row,” also known as “Camp Punishment,” where he was pushed into a dark room and the door locked. As he felt his

¹⁷⁷ “Fortitude,” Merriam-Webster website, accessed Mar. 30, 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/thesaurus/fortitude>.

¹⁷⁸ “Constancy,” Merriam-Webster website, accessed Mar. 30, 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/constancy>.

¹⁷⁹ Thorsness, *Surviving Hell: A POW's Journey*, 63 – 64.

way around the slab (he wanted to sleep) his hand ended up in human feces,¹⁸⁰ which triggered the prayer passage above.

He also highlighted a Psalm which Nick Rowe, whose memoir will be analyzed after Thorsness, also explicitly mentioned as personally meaningful: Psalm 23, which begins, “The Lord is my Shepherd: I shall not want.” He taught others that psalm via tap code, because remembering those verses was important to him: “By the time we came home, nearly all of us knew the 23rd Psalm. During the really tough first couple of years in prison, I felt like the 23rd Psalm was dictated by the Lord specifically for POWs.”¹⁸¹ Since Thorsness’ retelling of the Psalm’s significance was not told within the context of a specific event, that passage was not analyzed. However, it needed to be noted because both Thorsness and Rowe attribute importance to this prayer in making meaning of their POW experiences.

The personal significance of prayer as Thorsness described above provides some context for what happened in Thorsness’ “Our Father” chapter. As an aside, McCain also noted “having Church” in defiance against their captors. McCain and Thorsness both refer to the same locations in their camp (“Hanoi Hilton,” “Skid Row”), which suggests that they were in the same location, and they might have been describing the same event. Thorsness confirmed that he and McCain were indeed held captive together, although Thorsness arrived first.¹⁸² McCain did not elaborate on the topic of whether meaning was either established or not established around that event, which is why his narrative fragment of that event from his memoir was not included. Thorsness

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 63.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 69.

¹⁸² Brian Lawson, “Alabama man who was POW with John McCain: 'Trump owes us an apology',” Alabama Media Group website, July 20, 2015, accessed Mar. 30, 2017, http://www.al.com/news/index.ssf/2015/07/alabama_man_who_was_pow_with_j.html.

did elaborate on the meaning of it, and hence his narrative fragment is included in this analysis.

His description follows (I have underlined the markers of a progression):¹⁸³

The first Sunday in the large cell, someone said, “Let’s have Church service.” Good idea, we all agreed. One POW volunteered to lead the service, and we started gathering in the other end of the long rectangular cell from the cell door. No sooner had we gathered than an English-speaking Vietnamese officer who worked as an interrogator burst into the cell with a dozen armed guards. Ned Shuman went to the officer and said there wouldn’t be a problem; we were just going to have a short church service.

The response was unyielding: we were not allowed to gather into groups larger than three persons and we absolutely could not have a church service. During the next few days we all grumbled that we should not have backed down in our intention to have a church service and ought to do it the coming Sunday.

Toward the end of the week, Ned stepped forward and said, “Are we really committed to having church Sunday?” There was a murmuring of assent throughout the cell. Ned said, “No, I want to know person by person if you are really committed to holding church.” We all knew the implications of our answer: If we went ahead with the plan, some would pay the price— starting with the Ned himself because he was the SRO...when the 42nd man said yes, it was unanimous. We had 100 percent commitment to hold church next Sunday. At that instant, Ned knew he would end up in the torture cells at Heartbreak.

Sunday morning came, and we knew they would be watching us again. Once more, we gathered in the far end of the cell. As soon as we moved together, the interrogator and guards burst through the door. Ned stepped forward and said there wouldn’t be a problem: We were just going to hold a quiet ten-minute church service and then we would spread back out in the cell. As expected, they grabbed Ned and hauled him off to Heartbreak for torture.

Our plan unfolded. The second ranking man, the new SRO, stood, walked to the center of the cell and in a clear firm voice said, “Gentlemen,” our signal to stand, “the Lord’s Prayer.” We got perhaps maybe halfway through the prayer, when the guards grabbed the SRO and hauled him out the door toward Heartbreak. As planned, the number three SRO stood, walked to the center of the cell, and said, “Gentlemen, the Lord’s Prayer.”

We had gotten about to “Thy Kingdom come” before the guards grabbed him. Immediately, the number four SRO stood: “Gentlemen, the Lord’s Prayer.” I have never heard five or six words of the Lord’s Prayer— as far as we got before they seized him— recited so loudly, or so reverently. The interrogator was shouting “Stop, stop,” but we drowned him out.

The number five ranking officer was way back in the corner and took his time moving toward the center of the cell. (I was number seven, and not particularly anxious for him to hurry). But just before he got to the center of the area, the cell became pin-drop quiet. In Vietnamese, the interrogator spat out something to the guards, they grabbed number five SRO and they all left, locking the cell door behind them. The number six SRO began: “Gentlemen, the Lord’s Prayer.” This time we finished it.

¹⁸³ Thorsness, *Surviving Hell: A POW’s Journey*, 86 – 88.

Five courageous officers were tortured, but I think they believed it was worth it. From that Sunday on until we came home, we held a church service. We won. They lost. Forty-two men in prison pajamas followed Ned's lead. I know I will never see a better example of pure raw leadership or ever pray with a better sense of the meaning of the words.

The initial paragraphs describe an anti-transcendent event: denial of their request to "have Church service." Over a period of days, the senior ranking officer (SRO), "Ned," stepped forward and asked if they were committed to "having church" on Sunday. Ned explicitly asked whether all 42 POWs were committed to this act, in part because the implication would mean that some of them would "end up in the torture cells at Heartbreak," beginning with Ned, since he was the SRO. After getting confirmation of 100% commitment, they gathered on Sunday and started praying the Lord's Prayer. This act would have had to suspend Thorsness' "everyday heuristic" – they were collectively acknowledging the serious risk involved.

Thorsness outlines the premeditated event via a progression, tagged with four repetitions of, "Gentlemen, the Lord's Prayer." The first occurrence of that phrase happens after Ned is grabbed and "hauled off to Heartbreak for torture." The second repetition happens after the second-ranking SRO resumes and they grab him too. The third repetition happens as the fourth SRO leads them in what was probably "Thy will be done, on earth..." when Thorsness notes the extraordinary recitation of those "five or six words...so loudly, or so reverently," drowning out the interrogator's shouts to stop. The fourth repetition comes after the number five ranking officer was grabbed before he could lead, with the number six ranking officer making that last repetition, after which they completed the prayer.

Thorsness notes that "five courageous officers were tortured, but I think they believed it was worth it," and that from that Sunday on until they came home, "we held a Church service. We won. They lost." Extraordinary connections within and beyond Thorsness resulted from this

exercise of meaning-making. The words themselves carried extraordinary meaning afterwards (“I will never see a better example of pure raw leadership or ever pray with a better sense of meaning of the words”).

Sacred object #2 – American flag

Thorsness told the story of “Mike’s flag,” which happened towards the latter years of their captivity in 1972, in the context of a post-release period when he responded to the debates about desecrating the flags, which he had to listen to as a state senator from 1988 to 1992. He was asked to speak in favor of protecting the flag from desecration. He started by recalling those moments when, as a POW in Vietnam, the prisoners were allowed outside for a few minutes to pour a bucket of water over themselves from a concrete tank (a “bath”), and then tells the story of Mike’s flag:¹⁸⁴

During one of these moments, Mike saw a slimy rag in the gutter and whispered to me, “Leo, there’s something in the gutter I want to get back to the cell— keep the guard’s attention.” As a prisoner, you scrounge anything you can and help others to do the same. In this case I helped by talking loudly to draw attention while Mike stooped over and hid the rag in his pajama top. Mission accomplished. Back inside the cell we saw that it was a small handkerchief. Soap was precious but when Mike asked us we all chipped in a little to clean the cloth. Tattered gray was as good as he could get it.

Mike scrounged a small piece of red roof tile and laboriously ground it into a powder, which, mixed with a bit of water, became a faded red or maroon color to make the flag’s stripes. We had gotten a bit of medicine in the last year of our captivity, usually a blue pill of unknown provenance prescribed for all afflictions.

Mike patiently leached the color out of one of the pills and used it to make a blue square in the upper left of the handkerchief. With a needle made from bamboo wood and thread pulled from our single blanket, he stitched little white stars on this field of blue. It took Mike a couple weeks to make the flag— working at night under his mosquito net so the guards couldn’t see him.

Early one morning, he got up before the guards were active and held up the flag, waving it as if in a breeze. He said in a loud whisper, “Look here, gang.” As we turned Mike’s way, we automatically came to attention and saluted. Some of us began to cry.

Mike knew— we all knew— the Vietnamese would eventually find the flag during one of their periodic inspections when they stripped us naked and ran us outside

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 108 – 109.

so they could go through our belongings. The night after they found the flag they took Mike to the torture cell and beat him badly. Sometime after midnight they pushed him back into our cell. He was bloody and semi-conscious, so badly hurt that even his voice was gone. But as I've said, Mike was a tough man. He recovered in a couple of weeks and immediately started looking for another piece of cloth.

From the moment Mike spotted the rag, to his careful collecting of colors and patient stitching of stars, Thorsness recalled the painstaking process he went through to make something special for his fellow American POWs. The fact that Thorsness recalled such vivid detail of Mike's actions suggests that he: a) noticed something unusual about Mike's behavior in order to make note of it, and b) successfully established meaning to Mike's behavior after discovering what Mike made.

When Mike displayed the tattered American flag made from rags – “we automatically came to attention and saluted. Some of us began to cry.” The symbol held sacred meaning to them as American service members, and their ritual response to that symbol (a salute) emerged, some with visible emotion. The event of that flag being waved had both transcendent and anti-transcendent markers. Seeing the flag was a good thing for them, yet Mike knew, as they all did, that the flag would eventually be confiscated and someone would get beaten (Mike being the unfortunate recipient of said beating). Thorsness noted how persistent and resilient Mike was in continuing to reproduce that sacred symbol from whatever material he could use in their limited environment, providing them with more opportunities for transcendence with each wave of the flag.

Other fellow American POWs later spoke of Mike's example and how it helped them make meaning of those times in captivity. McCain attested to the significance of Mike's flag in 2013: “He was not making the flag because it made Mike Christian feel better. He was making that flag because he knew how important it was to us to be able to pledge our allegiance to our

flag and country.”¹⁸⁵ Clint D. Sadler, retired Navy Lieutenant commander, recalled in a Hall of Fame nominating letter at Purdue University, “For it was with Mike, standing before a tiny flag he had covertly made for us to pledge our allegiance to our country from a distant prison cell, that our love for America's blessings was so vividly reaffirmed.”¹⁸⁶

Homecoming: family and faith

After his release, Thorsness was flown to Scott Air Force Base, where his family met him. His reunion with family was rife with delays, but eventually they were reunited. He reconnected with the real counterparts of his “memory room” which he created in captivity. Family and faith were the first two things that truly mattered to him. Once reunited with family, he also wanted to take part in the faith ritual of holy communion. The events are captured below:¹⁸⁷

My sister Donna, brother John, and mother arrived at Scott two days after Gaylee and Dawn. I had a lot of catching up to do. John was married to Marky, and they had five children. When I left for combat, he was running a garage in Storden, Minnesota. He had decided to be a minister and finished four years of college and Lutheran seminary while I was in prison.

As soon as he got to Scott hospital, I asked if he would give me communion. As I took the wafer into my mouth, I thanked God once again for having brought me home to this country, these people, and this life.

These were Thorsness’ last words in his memoir. Not only does he confirm his desire to reestablish those extraordinary connections beyond himself, he confirms this reality as he took communion. His union with God was touched with gratitude to God for bringing him home to the things that mattered most to him: “this country, these people, and this life.”

¹⁸⁵ “John S. McCain,” International War Veterans’ Poetry Archives website, last updated May 15, 2013, accessed Mar. 30, 2017, <http://www.iwvpa.net/mccainjs/index.php>.

¹⁸⁶ “Michael Christian Biography: The Michael Christian Story,” Purdue University News website, accessed Mar. 30, 2017, <https://news.uns.purdue.edu/html3month/020517.Christian.bio.html>.

¹⁸⁷ Thorsness, *Surviving Hell: A POW’s Journey*, 125 -127.

Conclusion

Thorsness' experience of previous hardship appears to have prepared him in some way to survive the harshness of captivity in Vietnam for those six years. In his preface, he notes that "for the past 35 years my mind has worked to process what happened," signifying that meaning-making for him cannot be confined to the pages of his memoir. Having said that, Thorsness did share much of his meaning-making "black box," which included things like his "memory room," his stewardship of sacred objects, and importance of prayer, ritual, and God.

Like McCain, Thorsness also had a "breaking point," an event filled with shame and disintegration of his sense of self ("failure") and severing of extraordinary ties with his fellow POWs ("if I ever saw my fellow POWs, I wouldn't be able to hold my head up"). Yet, after confessing the whole affair to his fellow POWs, their gruff reassurances restored his sense of self ("I was not a failure") and provided him with great relief ("there...is no way for me to express my absolute euphoria at hearing these words").

His memoir comes full circle when he is flown home and is reunited with the real counterparts to his "memory room," which he created to escape the brutal reality of captivity in Vietnam. Family and faith were the two most important things he mentioned at the beginning of his captivity, and they were also the two last things he reflected on at the conclusion of his memoir. Thorsness' memoir was perhaps the most thematically organized of the three Vietnam POW memoirs studied, which also provided insights into the structures and priorities within his meaning-making process.

James “Nick” Rowe

Nick Rowe published his memoir about three years after his escape and rescue, placing his time elapsed before publication between McCain (two months) and Thorsness (35 years). I will analyze a total of seven narrative fragments in this section. Four of the narrative fragments analyzed will be around concrete events, and three will focus on a type of “output” – poetry. I will analyze three of those poems in their own section, which breaks the sequencing or the order in which Rowe presented all seven fragments. Given that the poems are more “output” than “input,” I chose to include them in their own section. Regarding the events (inputs), the first event describes Dave’s “last day,” in which Rowe reports listening to him die. I added a related event which was connected with the same Psalm that Rowe used as a tag or marker for Dave’s death, and appears only once more in the work. The second event describes the release of two fellow POWs, Dan and Jim. The third event reflects on his experience of Communist doctrine in contrast with his American identity, and the fourth event describes his homecoming.

Rowe’s “everyday” events varied by location, but he notes some similarities between camps about mid-way in his captivity: “The routine here was much like the one we had followed in the Neverglades. Get up, cook rice, eat, and sit or try to catch small fish with a borrowed pole and live until time to cook and eat our supper rice. Then, back to the cage.”¹⁸⁸ Indoctrination was another type of event he was exposed to repeatedly: “The indoctrinations continued on a low but incessant level. The guards conveyed to me the idea that they had all the time in the world and we could stay until we either learned or died.”¹⁸⁹ Mosquitoes were another part of their daily existence – “I was constantly slapping to keep them out of my mouth, nose and eyes; the rest of

¹⁸⁸ Rowe, *Five Years to Freedom*, 231.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 213.

my frame would have to accept the punishment.”¹⁹⁰ Disease and malnutrition were also their “constant companions.”¹⁹¹

“Dave’s Last Night”

I have labeled the events surrounding Dave’s death as an anti-transcendent, or one that carries markers that would normally prevent transcendence from occurring. Dave was the name that Nick Rowe used for a fellow American POW captured about two years into Rowe’s captivity in December 1965, and the two became friends until they were separated in March 1966. The passage reads:¹⁹²

That night was Dave’s last night. It was hard to lie in the leg irons and listen to a man die, calling the names of friends he had known before, muttering, his mind a thousand miles away from this hell and getting farther away each second. The spirit was struggling to break from its mortal bonds, fighting to rise from the filth and degradation, climbing away from all that bound those of us who remained behind.

I tried to feed Dave in the morning, but it was impossible. He couldn’t get a cup of water down without gagging. Ben Casey, the medic from the mangroves, came in and made a rapid evaluation of the case. There was a rapid discussion between the Intern and Ben, the older medic speaking sharply to the younger Intern, pointing at Dave, obviously upset by what he saw. Dan was called over and Ben told him Dave should be moved to a hospital as soon as possible. My immediate reaction was that if I were going to die, I’d want to die with Americans. The thought that possibly, just possibly, there was a hospital and Dave might be given treatment made me reconsider...As we lifted Dave down into the boat, he clung to my forearm, the strength of his grip far beyond anything I imagined possible. I found myself gripping his forearm and realized it was the ancient warriors’ arm clasp, as if Dave was bidding a farewell.

...I spent long nights after that analyzing my thoughts and reactions. I had felt bitterness and hatred building, feeding off the constant frustrations and anxiety. I could destroy myself if I allowed negative emotions to dominate my thinking, and partially from a strong sense of self-preservation, partially from a sense of responsibility to the other men, because I could offer them no solutions if I could find none for myself, I turned to the one positive force our captors could never challenge, God.

My religious background included Sunday schools, vacation Bible schools and church attendance as a youngster. I had never questioned religion nor had I ever really accepted it. It was something I lived with because that’s the way things were done. There

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 183.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 213.

¹⁹² Ibid, 223 – 227.

had never been a time of trial serious enough to make me consciously depend on a Supreme Being except when I felt some interest of mine was beyond my direct influence.

...I found myself returning to and drawing from that foundation in this situation where I was stripped of all material assets, leaving only the intangibles which form the core of our existence: faith, ethics, morals, beliefs. It had become a test of whatever inner strengths I possessed against the total physical control exercised by my captors. Were I to survive with my spirit intact, I could only turn to faith in the Power I believed to be so far greater than that which imprisoned me. For the first time in my life the words of the Twenty-third Psalm were a source of strength and consolation. From the loss of Dave on, I began to believe: "The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want."

Rowe could not process this event as "everyday" ("It was hard to lie in the leg irons and listen to a man die"). He makes this more evident as the narrative progresses ("I spent long nights after that analyzing my thoughts and reactions"). In this intensely anti-transcendent period as he processed Dave's death, he recognized the potential for self-annihilation if continued the path of bitterness and hatred ("I could destroy myself"). However, instead of remaining submerged in negativity, he had a turning point – "I turned to the one positive force our captors could never challenge, God." In that turn, the religious background that he never really questioned or accepted, or alternatively, which he relegated in the past to his "everyday heuristic," was reprocessed and interfaced with his own understanding of the "core of our existence: faith, ethics, morals, beliefs." As a result, he established extraordinary connections within and beyond himself, gaining interior strength and consolation from that prayer, and recalling and affirming his belief in a Supreme Being.

The first line of the 23rd Psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want," appeared only once more in Rowe's memoir, a few weeks before his escape and rescue:¹⁹³

Killer Mouse was the best indication of the actual feelings of the guards as he came down to fulfill his required minutes of inane chatter. After being mildly ignored he seemed to lose his childish temper and snapped out as he left, "Bo sau lam! Toi noi rang Mat Trang sap phat. Hieu?" — Rowe, you are very bad! I tell you that the Front is about to punish you. Do you understand?

¹⁹³ Ibid, 405, 406.

I understood all too well and wasn't planning on staying around for the coming events. In this period of increasing stress, I found myself turning to almost a total dependence on prayer for solace and strength. I had forgotten it for a short while and had found myself floundering as I sought a way out of the maze.

Now I was again trusting that "the Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." With that foundation, I was working to make an escape in early January, prior to a move by the VC. This attempt would be an all-out effort and if it required killing guards, I was willing to do it. I had reached the point where I could not afford to be recaptured and the death or serious injury of one or more of the guards would deter the younger ones sufficiently to improve my chances. (406)

Again we see that Rowe's everyday heuristic is suspended when "Killer Mouse" threatens him with punishment: "I understood all too well...in this period of increasing stress, I found myself turning to almost a total dependence on prayer for solace and strength." This time, rather than facing the death of a friend, he was facing the possibility of his own demise. He worked with deliberation to plan his escape, even if that meant killing guards. The connections with that psalm, with God, and within himself, appear to have been reaffirmed with the repetition of that verse, which became an anchor of sorts to root him in his determination to break free of his captors ("Now I was again trusting that 'The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.'"). Although this is not in the sequence that Rowe presented these moments, I paired them here because of their common "coordinates" in moral space: Rowe's connection with God through this psalm, and the way that this line appears paired with an encounter with death, either Dave's or his own.

Dan and Jim released with John, but Rowe left behind

In the excerpt below, Rowe has just seen Dan, Jim, and John off, who were released to go home. He was told by his captors that his friends would be released but he would stay behind

because he had “shown a bad attitude toward the cadre of the Front and toward soldiers; violated camp regulations; and foolishly tried to escape.”¹⁹⁴ Once he returned to his cage, he recalls:¹⁹⁵

The cage was so empty. The darkness and silence in the camp created a feeling of utter loneliness. Only the mosquitoes greeted me as I stooped through the low doorway, finding my net drooping from one corner, a huge tear in one side. It was too much. I sat down on my mat, partially covered by the ripped netting, and put my head down on my knees, not feeling the insects that covered my exposed skin, as I was overwhelmed by a rush of thoughts:

Jim and Dan and John. All the days we’d spent together, fighting to stay alive, hoping to go home. And now they were on their way; I was left behind. There would be no American voices, no friendly presence other than my own. They were going home, going to stay alive, going to their loved ones, going to eat real food. They had broken through the barrier and were breathing free air while I continued to gasp for each breath in this closed, oppressive atmosphere, my nothing world.

The silence in the hut was like a vacuum, with only the sound of my voice when I muttered to myself breaking the void. It was going to be a problem to readjust to solitary existence. (278) I had passed my fourth year of captivity on 29 October 1967, thanking God that I was still alive and that three of our group had been released in time for their lives to be saved.

This was an extraordinary event, which clearly suspended Rowe’s everyday heuristic: he had to say farewell to his friends, not knowing if he would see them again. This extraordinary event carried both transcendent (“I was still alive,” “three of our group had been released in time for their lives to be saved”) and anti-transcendent (“utter loneliness,” “it was too much,” “my nothing world”). However, rather than succumbing to the feelings of loneliness, the “closed, oppressive atmosphere,” and his “nothing world,” Rowe still established meaning of this event by making extraordinary connections within (a poem, to be discussed in the next section) and beyond himself (praying to God, being thankful for his friends’ release).

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 272.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 277 – 279.

Poems: making connections from anti-transcendent events

Nick Rowe had a vivid memory of his dreams and his poetry, which he shares with his readers at distinct points in his narrative. Poetry appears to be one of Rowe's tangible "outputs" of transcendence, particularly of anti-transcendent events. He shared five poems in his memoir – one that he wrote about his capture, which he dreamt two years before it happened, one that he wrote as a tribute to Rocky when he realized that he was dead, and the other three around difficult events about which he tried to make sense. I chose three poems that he wrote during his POW period. The first poem was written about a year into his captivity, as he struggled with dysentery and infection. The second is connected with the release of Dan, Jim, and John ("Thoughts after four years"). The third poem, which he wrote in 1968 after a period of concentrated indoctrination is connected with a later narrative fragment, which I analyzed after the poems in this section.

Untitled poem

One of the extraordinary difficulties that Rowe had to endure as a POW was disease, infection, and filth, while confined to a small cage. The following poem was written in the first year of his captivity:¹⁹⁶

I wrote this poem in Nam Can Region in 1964 when the attacks of dysentery were severe and a fungus infection had set in. I dreamed it one night, woke up, and wrote it down. I believed it.

When all outside and round about,
is crushing, pushing, crowding down;
The air itself is filthy, dirty,
the outer shell corrupt, unclean.

From deep within, a voice rings through:
“Be calm, be still and carry on;
For I am untouched by all mundane,
and so forever shall I be.

For I am God’s and thy shell is God’s;
Together, we form thee;
Thy shell is clay and will be dust,
but I am all eternal.

You and I, we travel far; through birth and life,
through mortal death and life hereafter;
What happens now, in time will pass,
and memory, like your shell itself, cannot last.

So look up ahead at times to come
despair is not for us;
We have a world and more to see,
while this remains behind.”

Rowe’s poetry traces a transcendent process, beginning with the anti-transcendent and ending with extraordinary connections within and beyond himself. The first stanza carries distinctly

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, 80.

anti-transcendent markers (“crushing, pushing, crowding down,” “the air itself is filthy, dirty”), tempting the poet to recoil from his environment.

If we look at this five-stanza poem, the middle stanza contains an interpretive key to his sense of self: “For I am God’s and thy shell is God’s; together, we form thee; Thy shell is clay and will be dust, but I am all eternal.” He arrived at this from an extraordinary connection within himself (“From deep within, a voice rings through”). This stanza carries the markers of meaning-making that results in extraordinary ties within and beyond himself.

The next two stanzas follow an arc that goes beyond the poet’s initial state in the first stanza, ending with a call to alter the gaze of the poet: “So look up ahead at times to come; despair is not for us; We have a world and more to see, while this remains behind.” Rowe’s statement about the poem, “I believed it,” confirms that meaning was successfully established for him regarding this anti-transcendent event (dysentery, fungal infection).

“Thoughts after four years”

Earlier in the analysis Rowe wrote about what it was like to be in his cell when Dan, Jim, and John were released and he was left alone. Although the poem is not dated, he notes in his prose that “I had passed my fourth year of captivity on 29 October 1967,” and by November 3, Dan, Jim, and John were in Cambodia, “meeting with representatives of the Central Committee, American peace emissaries and reporters of the international press.”¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, 279.

The poem, which he entitled, “Thoughts after four years,” was placed opposite the beginning of Chapter 7, which begins, “The cage was so empty.” His poem is below:¹⁹⁸

Time is infinite and creeps on knees,
made stiff with age, so slowly does it crawl;
But looking back, the years have flown,
each so useless, each a void.

Perhaps it is this that makes it so,
the painfully slow, yet rapid flight,
of many days, none with a face, none with its mark;
one like another in long endless procession.

What fate is it that holds us so,
suspended in this abhorrent void;
surrounded close by an alien force,
while all around us life flows on.

I seek the light that issues forth,
from that which I knew and those whom I love;
that which now seems like a dream from the past,
and forms my greatest hope for the future.

With faith and hope, I will survive,
determined not to falter, not to die;
a promise to myself to stay alive
swearing that to oneself, one cannot lie.

So, oh infinite time, creep on, creep on;
or speed like Mercury, as the wind;
for though suspended, imprisoned, bound,
my mind reaches out to touch the light.

And somewhere in the surrounding dark,
the light I seek already glows;
perhaps from here 'tis only a glimmer,
but at the source, it is sun bright and strong.

So span I will the time between,
and at time's end I'll touch the light;
for I have felt the Lord's strong hand,
and with his help, I cannot fail.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 276.

Again, Rowe begins with a stanza that carries anti-transcendent markers (“made stiff with age, so slowly does it crawl; each so useless, each a void”). The poem reaches an inflection point in the fourth stanza – rather than spiral into the negativity of the moment, he seeks something very different: “I seek the light that issues forth, from that which I knew and those whom I love; that which now seems like a dream from the past, and forms my greatest hope for the future.”

The next four stanzas trace an arc that moves far beyond the anti-transcendent moment described in the first stanza. The fifth stanza exhibits stabilization of his sense of self, “determined not to falter, not to die; a promise to myself to stay alive swearing that to oneself, one cannot life.” The fifth stanza points to an action – reaching beyond himself (“my mind reaches out to touch the light”), and by the last stanza, he has established extraordinary connections within and beyond himself (“for I have felt the Lord’s strong hand, and with his help, I cannot fail.”).

“Unraveling the system”

Indoctrination was another form of torture that American POWs endured while in captivity in Vietnam, and Rowe was no exception. He wrote a poem to establish meaning with these anti-transcendent events:¹⁹⁹

Unraveling the system, after concentrated indoctrination in 1968

Rest there, stranger, and enter not the green canopied world of progressive decay. From afar you viewed this land of trees, standing straight, leafy green, and thought to yourself in a pleased, human way, “how tall they stand, how thick the leaves. How alive that world of trees must be.”

For from afar it so appears. The trees reveal their gift of Nature, but hide from view the world within. So you approached while the sun was high, thinking of the shade and the cool relief from the sun’s burning rays.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, 369 – 370.

I watched you come and knew your thoughts, for there are those who have entered before. You think their same thoughts and walk their same path. If you are still and listen for a moment, you can hear their cries, the voices of the lost. Their number is many, but their voices are one;
They seek to return, to find the light and cry for help as they see no path.

For once within the forest land, the trees are thick, the shade is deep.
One might think, "I'll go not far, just enough to find the shade and thus, when I choose, I can return." But to enter one step is to lose your way, for the spell of the shade will lure you on and seek to decay you as the leaves.

Listen, my friend, though I know you not we are brothers, for we both are men
and as a brother I give this advice: I have entered and I have returned. If enter you must
and enter you will, then remember these thoughts:

Know who you are and from whence you came; Remember the light and the sun's
cleansing warmth;

Mark well the spot at which you entered and mark each spot at which you stop;
Remember your Faith and keep it strong;
Do not expect to find a path and be prepared
to make your own;

When it is day you must travel far, but when it is dark, then rest and remember;
Conquer the urge to panic and run,
for they insure you'll never return;
When daylight comes, then rest not long and quickly seek your way
or you, like the leaves will also decay.
For night falls early in the forest and darkness blinds you, hides the way.

The first stanza warns the reader to "enter not the green canopied world of progressive decay."

The "forest land," he goes on, has a spell that "will lure you on and seek to decay you," causing one to lose his way. The inflection point of the poem is found about midway through the poem, where the poet identifies himself as brother to the reader, who may also be subjected to indoctrination. The second half of the poem identifies several antidotes to the "spell of the shade": "know who you are and from whence you came...remember your Faith and keep it strong...rest and remember...conquer the urge to panic and run."

Rowe communicates an imperative to “rest” three times in the poem: once at the beginning and twice towards the end. The significance of rest as a way to enable resistance was also noted by McCain in his memoir. McCain said that allowing him to rest was a very serious mistake on the part of his captors, who could not break him again after that. Rowe also notes, again imperatively, the need to “remember,” once at the inflection point of the poem, and three times throughout the second half of the poem. The reader is told to “remember the light and the sun’s cleansing warmth...remember your Faith and keep it strong...rest and remember.” The notion of “return,” which was mentioned four times, is only mentioned once in the context of successful return – only the poet has returned from the “forest land.” The other three repetitions of return refer to the “lost” who seek to return but are unable because they see no path, the illusion of thinking one can return if he steps into the shade, and how the urge to panic and run will insure that the reader will never return. The “light” is also significant, as those who are lost seek to find the “light” but see no path; and the reader is told to “remember the light” right after he is advised to “know who you are and from whence you came.” This “light” does not take on full meaning until the last part of his memoir.

Communism

Returning from the poetry back to the prose of the memoir, Rowe later elaborates on his response to the ideology that his captors were trying to indoctrinate. He explains the doctrine below and describes his initial response:²⁰⁰

The basic doctrine included their “three no’s”: no family, no religion, no nationality. All three were considered means of governing the people and instilling loyalties other than to the party and the state. For that reason they were eliminated. There could be only the party and the state, which, in the revolutionary rhetoric, represented the people. Therefore, to oppose the party was to oppose the people and, conversely, those who supported the party supported the people.

To create their type of state society meant to fragment the home, sowing the seeds of distrust in order to break down opposition and counter the centuries of filial loyalty and obedience which ran counter to the needs of the party. Religion was tolerated, but only until it could be abolished. The entire “lesson” of the destroyed Catholic church shown me on the trip to Ho Tan Loc was shattered by Mafia himself in a later discussion in which he said, “we do not deprive the people of their right to worship because to so deprive them would cause them to resist and we do not desire counterrevolution; but over a period of time, through education and culture, we will show them that there is no God, no life after death, no reason to follow the Church. At that time they will give up their false beliefs freely and follow us.” I thought, “What is worse, to destroy the physical structure of a church which can be rebuilt or to destroy the foundations of faith itself and then create an environment in which it can never be reborn?”

He realizes in that same section that “there would be no vestige of the old culture left if this force were allowed to proceed unchecked.”²⁰¹ His antidotes to indoctrination in his poem, *Unraveling the system after concentrated indoctrination in 1968* – “know who you are and from whence you came...remember your Faith and keep it strong” – are directly opposed to the basic doctrine of their “three no’s”: “no family, no religion, no nationality.”

Once he understood the implications of communism and its spread, he made the decision to help resist it: “If they, in a Communist controlled zone, were willing to resist, I was now, as I had been in 1963, willing to help. That was my decision.”²⁰² By establishing deep ties within and

²⁰⁰ Ibid, 389 – 390.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid, 392.

beyond himself in reflecting on the implications of indoctrination into communism, Rowe established coordinates for himself in moral space, the imperative to resist and help eliminate communism's influence. He remained committed to this cause long after his release until his assassination 21 years later in the Philippines, where he worked with the CIA to penetrate the New People's Army (NPA) and its parent communist party.

"I had reached out and touched the light"

Rowe's final transcendent experience was his return to his family home, the cradle of his family, early religious formation, and national identity – the three things that communist ideology sought to destroy. The memory of this event is described below, with connections to his "Unraveling the system" and "Thoughts after four years" poems:²⁰³

The car stopped in front of the two-story white frame house in which I'd grown up. An American flag stood in the front yard, rippling gently in the slight breeze. My eyes swept the entire scene, catching and holding brief images: the wild olive trees, the chimney, the upstairs windows, the front door. I was walking toward the house, my steps quickening as I was drawn to the source of comfort, guidance and strength I had known as a youth and through young manhood. The front door swung open and my Dad stepped out into the light.

There was only one person in the whole world at that time; everything around me faded in a haze and only the slightly built, silvery-haired man on the porch existed: my Dad. The years dropped away and I knew I was home! I was holding him close, afraid if I let him go he wouldn't be there. "Dad, Dad, I'm sorry I didn't get home sooner; they just wouldn't let me go."

We walked through the door into our living room where Mom waited; had waited for five years, never questioning if I would come back, but only when. She waited here, where we had said goodbye, waited to welcome me home. She rose from the couch and I was hugging her, five long years' worth.

The three of us stood for a long moment, touching, communicating without speaking. My world was complete; I had reached out and touched the light.

In this event, he is reunited with those extraordinary connections within and beyond himself, which he kept remembering throughout his captivity, never forgetting who he was or "from

²⁰³ Ibid, 467.

whence” he came, remembering the light, and remembering his faith and keeping it strong. Remembering “the light,” his “faith,” and “keeping it strong,” all appear to refer back to the poem “Unraveling the system,” which he wrote after “concentrated indoctrination” in 1968. They also appear to describe antidotes to the destabilization of his sense of self, which the indoctrination, if successful could have caused. The last stanza of his “Thoughts after four years” poem states, “at time’s end I’ll touch the light.” Rowe’s reunion with his family stabilizes his sense of self, and its meaning is encapsulated in the last sentence: “My world was complete; I had reached out and touched the light.”

Conclusion

Rowe’s everyday heuristic carried some different markers from his fellow memoirists. He and many of his fellow prisoners were kept in small cages for much of their captivity, as opposed to cells or rooms. There were also similarities: the filth, disease, malnutrition, ever-present, “low level, incessant” levels of indoctrination attempts. As a result, it took different triggers to suspend that everyday heuristic: the death rattles of his friend Dave; the release of his friends while he was left behind; and highly intense efforts to disassemble his belief system as an American and indoctrinate him with an ideology that contradicted his native framework for meaning.

He also created tangible “outputs” of his meaning-making regarding some of his extraordinary experiences in the form of poems, something which the other two Vietnam era memoirists did not do. The poems made meaning of three anti-transcendent events: his first year of captivity; the fourth anniversary of his captivity; and “concentrated indoctrination.” These poems also mapped coordinates in moral space that he would refer to in future situations: be

calm, be still and carry on; for I have felt the Lord's strong hand, and with his help, I cannot fail; know who you are and from whence you came; remember your Faith and keep it strong; conquer the urge to panic and run.

Most of the events that were analyzed in Rowe's memoir for which meaning was explicitly established were anti-transcendent, which would have been more likely to induce destabilization of his sense of self or a severing of extraordinary ties within and beyond himself. However, he transcended these conditions with his reliance on his faith and prayer life, memories of his sense of self before he was captured, and his sense of gratitude for his life throughout the ordeal, even at his four year mark. The transcendent event (his homecoming) was described and made meaningful in ways that established extraordinary connections with his faith and his sense of self as an American, and in the context of his membership in his family. It also reinforced the extraordinary ties he had with his mother and father as they "stood for a long moment, touching, communicating without speaking."

Although Rowe's memoir was more difficult to follow thematically than was McCain's or Thorsness' memoirs, in many ways the poems served as concentrated expressions of meaning that pulled together several experiences in time-space. They also appeared to confirm the outputs of transcendence, when meaning is established for transcendent and anti-transcendent events.

Similarities and Differences across Vietnam War Memoirs

All three memoirists had some crossover in their everyday experiences: beatings, lack of hygiene, insufficient food rations, and torture. Thorsness was the only memoirist to recall previous hardship as some form of inoculation against the hardships experienced as a prisoner of war in Vietnam. All three also cited prayer as a help in their times of need. Both Thorsness and Rowe specifically identified Psalm 23 as a source of consolation.

Thorsness and McCain reported their breaking points as their lowest points in their whole period as a POW, and both described the moments before and after meaning was established for these events. Prior to making meaning of their breaking points, both appeared to describe destabilization of their sense of self (McCain was reduced to an “animal” and Thorsness defined himself as a “failure”). Thorsness also noted how he would not be able to hold his head up among his fellow POWs, indicating a weakening of the extraordinary connection he had with them. After meaning was established (McCain realized that everyone had a breaking point, and he reached his; Thorsness was consoled by his fellow POWs, after being told that everyone that went through that kind of interrogation either broke or died (or both)), they restabilized. McCain, after getting rest, was able to resist, and they couldn’t “bust” him again; Thorsness was happy to reclassify himself as “average”.

Thorsness and Rowe provided insight into their meaning-making “black box” in a way that no other memoirist did. Thorsness described his “memory room,” which he constructed mentally to escape the pain of his confinement and keep his extraordinary connections within and beyond himself intact. He also disclosed a ranking of those things that were most important to him: his family and faith were highest on his list. Rowe elaborated extensively on how he

arrived at the meaning of Dave's death, being left behind after four years while his friends were released, and concentrated indoctrination by his captors.

Thorsness also described how sacred objects established deep connections within and beyond himself, like Mike's flag and his wedding band. These sacred objects also helped maintain specific coordinates for him in moral space. For example, the American flag was a symbol of much more than the abstraction of country. It had concrete meaning as his fellow POW risked getting beaten to construct this symbol again and again, to give them all hope and remind them of who they were. Thorsness later defended protection of the flag from desecration as a State Senator, retelling this story to that audience to relay those coordinates in moral space once more. His wedding band was sacred to him because of how it connected him with his wife Gaylee, to whom he was married for 53 years at the time of the memoir.

Rowe was the only memoirist of the three that seemed to personally produce tangible "output" of his meaning-making in the form of poetry. The three that were selected for analysis reflected on the conditions of his imprisonment, his fourth year anniversary of imprisonment, and the intense efforts of his captors to indoctrinate him. Each of the poems followed an arc from anti-transcendent conditions to transcendent ones. For example, the first (untitled) poem began with noting how the air itself was "filthy, dirty, the outer shell corrupt, unclean," but ended by telling the reader to "look up ahead at times to come," for "despair is not for us; we have a world and more to see, while this remains behind." His "Thoughts after four years" poem begins with anti-transcendent conditions ("the years have flown, so useless, each a void"), but rises on a transcendent arc such that the last stanza states, "So span I will the time between, and at time's end I'll touch the light." The same can be said of this third poem, in which the reader is initially warned not to enter a "green canopied world of progressive decay," and progresses with

antidotes to what would otherwise be an anti-transcendent end (“remember your Faith and keep it strong...conquer the urge to panic and run...rest not long and quickly see your decay...”).

World War II and Vietnam: Transcendence across Time and Space

The most striking difference between the World War II memoirs and the Vietnam memoirs was the presence or absence of prayer as a marker for transcendence. None of the World War II memoirists disclosed whether prayer helped in their meaning-making. Sirianni (WWII – Germany) did mention praying for certain things – resisting captors, for the war to end, or just praying as he was being transported – but he did not associate it with meaning-making as did the Vietnam memoirists. Gordon (WWII – Japan) also mentioned praying for others, for their captors to die, or for the war to end, but prayer was not part of a larger mechanism for meaning-making for him, either.

All three Vietnam War memoirists explicitly spoke of how prayer helped them make meaning of their situations. McCain described what he prayed for – moral and physical courage, guidance and wisdom to do the right thing. He also noted what he did *not* pray for – superhuman strength or for God to strike the North Vietnamese dead. Both Thorsness and Rowe made special note of Psalm 23 as a prayer that helped make meaning for them. Thorsness said that he really began to believe what the Psalmist said (the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want) after trying to make sense of Dave’s death. Thorsness said that he felt that the 23rd Psalm was “dictated by the Lord specifically for POWs.”²⁰⁴ He also taught others the psalm using the tap code, so that by the time they came home, nearly everyone knew that psalm. Thorsness also recalls the meaning of the Lord’s Prayer in a different event – they decided to hold “church” in

²⁰⁴ Thorsness, *Surviving Hell: A POW’s Journey*, 69.

defiance of their captors, and five ranking officers were taken away for torture before they finished the prayer. In his reflection of that event, he said that “I will never see a better example of pure raw leadership or ever pray with a better sense of the meaning of the words.”²⁰⁵

Some memoirists offered a glimpse into their “black boxes” of meaning-making. Sirianni and Jefferson (WWII – Germany) explained how they were able to establish meaning for their experiences. Sirianni said that telling his story helped him reconnect with his family and friends. For him, writing the memoir was an antidote to the problem of suppressing bad memories. Jefferson situated his meaning-making within the context of his evolving sense of self, first as an African American, and later also as a Tuskegee Airman. Thorsness (Vietnam) constructed a “memory room” in his mind to escape the pain of his captivity, and within that memory room were those things that were most important to him, the top two being family and faith. He often took the reader to this memory room to show how or why he established meaning for certain events during his captivity. He also had sacred objects, of which I analyzed two descriptions – one of his wedding ring, one of the American flag, both of which were linked to extraordinary events he experienced while in captivity. Rowe (Vietnam) ruminated at length on how he made meaning of certain events, like Dave’s death. He also produced “outputs” (poems) of transcendence that crystallized either his sense of self or his extraordinary connection within and beyond himself. These poems, which were written after he experienced anti-transcendent events, had a transcendent arc that provided the reader with a glimpse of his “black box” of meaning-making.

Positive outcomes of transcendence as meaning-making process were most often expressed in terms of extraordinary connections within and beyond the self, usually with

²⁰⁵ Ibid, 88.

coordinates in moral space attached. For example, freedom was a repeated topic which, when regained after being lost, resulted in a norm for greater appreciation of it and of symbols that represented it. In Sirianni's case, the church, its steeple, and arch became their symbol for freedom because it was outside their camp. In Thorsness' case, it was the American flag, which he appreciated whenever Mike made one from scraps of cloth he sewed together as a prisoner, and which he also defended later from desecration as a state senator. Rowe's reflection on communism after intense indoctrination sessions led him to be firmly resolved for over two decades to help eradicate its influence around the world.

Some memoirists also recalled extraordinary connections with family and friends which were made stronger when meaning was made of extraordinary, relevant experiences that suspended their everyday heuristic. Thorsness had a sacred object (wedding ring) that symbolized his connection to his wife, which he resisted letting his captors take from him during interrogation. Rowe's description of his reunion with his father and mother was explicitly linked to the poetry that he wrote while he was a prisoner in Vietnam.

Other examples of extraordinary connections established within as a result of making meaning include Biggs' first encounter with white women since his release, which brought home a loneliness that can only be fulfilled with female companionship; Jefferson's anti-transcendent experience of racism when he returned to America, symbolizing that he was home; Zinke's first American meal since his release, signifying that his humanity was once again recognized; and McCain's conclusion after thinking about his experience, that one of the most important things in life, along with a man's family, is to make some contribution to his country.

Although memoirs were selected from among authors with known resilience, I did find instances of anti-transcendence in some of them, resulting in destabilization of the writer's sense

of self and/or severing of extraordinary connections within and beyond himself. One example is found in two of the Vietnam War memoirs – “breaking points,” or events in which the prisoners succumbed in some way to the torture of their captors (McCain and Thorsness). Both memoirists eventually made sense of the event, but they narrated the moments before this happened, and the results were stark: McCain was reduced to “animal”; Thorsness was reduced to “failure” and felt he could not hold his “head up” among his fellow POWs because of his shame. Biggs provides two examples that focused on the same kinds of events – forced desecration and destruction of families’ graves to make way for the Japanese construction projects. He noted how he (and the others) became hardened, calloused, displaying little reverence for the dead or sympathy for the families, their “finer emotions” slowly being ground away. His connections with other human beings were weakened by these events, for which he could not establish meaning.

Finally, three memoirists appeared to have experienced hardship prior to their capture, and two of the three explicitly stated that their prior experience of hardship helped them get through their experience as POWs. Gordon (World War II – Japan) experienced a difficult upbringing in Hell’s Kitchen, which included violence, addiction, abandonment, and homelessness before he enlisted at the age of 18. Thorsness (Vietnam War) grew up in Depression era poverty on a poor Minnesota farm. Both Gordon and Thorsness credit their previous experience of hardship as contributing to their ability to survive and recover from their experience as POWs. Jefferson (World War II – Germany) arguably also experienced hardship as an African American in early to mid-twentieth century America. He acknowledged the racism and humiliation he experienced, but simply credits those events as part of his growing up in mid-twentieth century America and did not make an explicit connection between that and his ability

to survive his captivity. He does note, however, that he was “never really scared” in *Stalag Luft III*, knowing that he would just have to “sit out” his captivity.²⁰⁶

The next section will discuss how these findings work with the model of transcendence I proposed earlier in the study.

²⁰⁶ Jefferson, *Red Tail Captured, Red Tail Free*, 85.

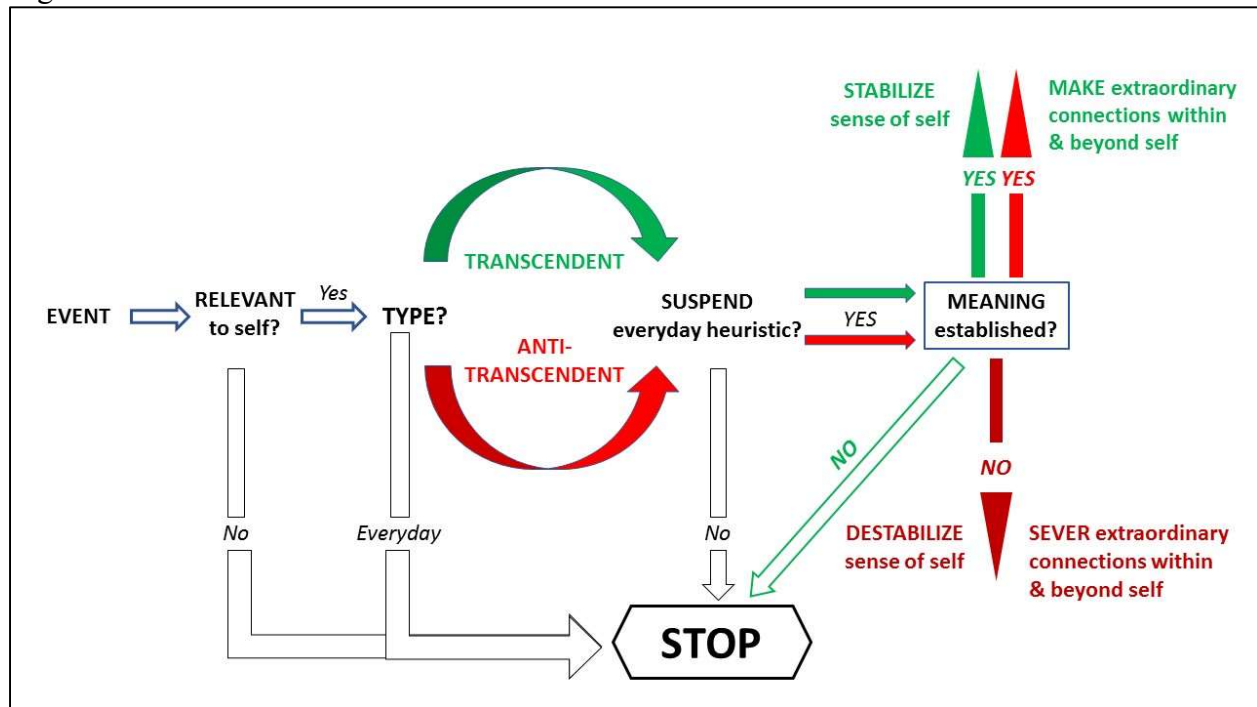
Part IV – Discussion and Conclusion

We have looked at the memoirists of eight resilient American service members who survived a POW experience and wrote about it later. Five of the memoirists were World War II veterans, and three were Vietnam veterans. The experiences were clustered around three kinds of camps: German- and Japanese-run camps during World War II, and Vietnamese-run camps during World War II. Meaning-making was traced for both positive and negative extraordinary, personally relevant experiences that suspended the authors' everyday heuristic, with notable effects relating to sense of self and extraordinary ties within and beyond the self. Two occurrences of anti-transcendence were also captured, both in reference to a "breaking point" and both located in the Vietnam War POW memoirs.

Reviewing the model

I have tracked events that passed the various phase gates as indicated in Figure 1. Tracking whether an event was directly relevant to the author was relatively straightforward. However, tagging events as transcendent or anti-transcendent, meaning that they were both relevant and extraordinary (in either a positive or negative way), required a few preliminary measures. First, I had to establish a "baseline" of what the everyday experience was like for the memoirists, using his own words. Second, I had to find contextual cues to determine whether an event would have suspended their everyday heuristic.

Fig. 1 A Model of Transcendence and Anti-Transcendence



Some cues were easier to pick up than others. Regaining freedom, for example, was often a transcendent event for which the memoirist later established meaning. Breaking under torture, another event that was extraordinary and highly negative for them, also suspended their everyday heuristic. In this case the event was referred to as the lowest point in his captivity. Witnessing the death of a fellow POW was also surrounded by prose that indicated a suspension of the everyday heuristic, such as Rowe's account of listening to Dave's dying process over a period of several hours ("It was hard to lie in the leg irons and listen to a man die.").¹

Other events were more subtle in their qualities, and finding textual evidence that the everyday heuristic was suspended was more challenging. For example, encounters with natural beauty may or may not have suspended the everyday heuristic, depending on the time at which the memoirist encountered it. Biggs' encounter with the beautiful moonlight suspended his

¹ Rowe, *Five Years to Freedom*, 223.

everyday heuristic as he both noted superlatively how beautiful it was and provided a secondary form of confirmation that this was not an “everyday” experience by noting how the other prisoners commented on it. Similarly, being forced to desecrate and destroy graves for the Japanese construction projects was laced with indicators that were worded with more subtlety: “At first we were reluctant to disturb these gravesites...with the destruction of an ancestral grave the family swarmed into the construction area, screaming, shouting, and weeping. Sometimes the Japanese delayed work long enough for the family to remove the remains...”²

Meaning-making – establishing meaning for extraordinary, personally relevant events

Although I did not expect to see the inner workings of meaning-making, or the “black box” of transcendence as a meaning-making process, some of the memoirists did offer a glimpse into their meaning-making processes. Most notable were Jefferson (World War II – Germany), Thorsness (Vietnam), and Rowe (Vietnam). Jefferson had a section explicitly answering the question, “What did it all mean?”³ His was a more holistic perspective of meaning-making in that section than one that was specific to each extraordinary event. Thorsness built his “memory room” and invited the reader to view its contents, which contained those things most important to him. Rowe both ruminated in his narrative and wrote poetry. The poetry was an “output” of the meaning-making process but also provided a glimpse of how he arrived at the meaning: each poem analyzed in the study followed an arc from anti-transcendent events to establishing meaning and reaching outcomes consistent with successful meaning-making, or providing antidotes to potential outcomes of anti-transcendence, as he did in “Unraveling the system”.

² Biggs, Jr., *Behind the Barbed Wire: Memoir of a World War II US Marine Captured in North China in 1941 and Imprisoned by the Japanese until 1945*, 117, 128.

³ Jefferson, *Red Tail Captured, Red Tail Free*, 121.

Transcendence: outcomes

Both stabilization of sense of self and extraordinary connections within and beyond the self were observed as outcomes of transcendence in these memoirs. Most frequently I found the latter outcome mentioned more than the former. Jefferson is perhaps the only memoirist who consistently referred to his evolving sense of self over time in a way that enabled the reader to recognize what a stabilized sense of self looked like in the end – he was African American and he was Tuskegee Airman, and was proud to be both.

As mentioned earlier, extraordinary connections within and beyond the self included connections with loved ones, God, faith, symbols, especially of freedom, and the familiar (e.g., White women for Biggs, American food and camaraderie for Zincke). Very often these extraordinary connections corresponded with coordinates in moral space that was later accessed and acted upon. For example, Mike's flag in Vietnam reminded Thorsness of what it represented, and he later as a state senator spoke in favor of protecting the American flag from desecration at a senate hearing. While still in the hospital, Thorsness asked for communion when his brother John arrived to see him, to thank God "for having brought me home to this country, these people, and this life."⁴ Gordon, after being rescued by Bill Standish, declared as part of the extraordinary connection made that day that exceptional men like him "must never be forgotten". Standish was immortalized in Gordon's memoir. Jefferson's experience as an African American and Tuskegee Airman led him to get involved in the Civil Rights movement and set up chapters of Tuskegee Airmen around the world, long after his release from the German POW camp.

⁴ Thorsness, *Surviving Hell: A POW's Journey*, 127.

Transcendence does not necessarily imply forgiveness

One insight gained from Gordon's memoir was that transcendence as a meaning-making process did not necessarily imply forgiveness. He would not forgive the "heartless actions" of his fellow American prisoners, and could not extend his hand in friendship to them. Having established meaning for these anti-transcendent events (his fellow Americans violated an implicit moral code of behavior), he acted on that coordinate in moral space fifty years later by withholding his friendship from them collectively.

It should be noted here that transcendence and healing seem to be different processes as depicted by the memoirists, although they may converge from time to time. Sirianni, for example, noted symptoms consistent with the DSM-V criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder, and he outlined two decisions that helped him heal. The first was to tell his story, which helped make meaning of his experiences, and the second was to get the help of a psychologist. Sirianni transcended the extraordinary events of his POW experience by making meaning of it, but the healing process may have needed both the meaning-making and the psychotherapy. Perhaps the healing begins with meaning-making and/or transcendence, but for some, healing needs additional support through clinical professionals.

Anti-transcendence – outcomes

"Breaking points" in torture, forced violation of taboos, such as desecrating or destroying the graves of other human beings, and deprivation of freedom, were all anti-transcendent events for these Americans that also resulted in some cases in anti-transcendence (the anti-process to meaning-making). Destabilization of self and severing of extraordinary connections within and beyond the self were described in some form by the memoirists who described them.

Anti-transcendence as an anti-process requires more attention in the literature, particularly as people struggle to make meaning of a variety of personally relevant, extraordinarily negative experiences. When meaning-making repeatedly fails, the resulting destabilization of one's sense of self or severing of extraordinary ties within and beyond the self can lead to anomy, or a sense of chaos. If the presuicidal state is characterized by some failure or setback that reflects badly on the self,⁵ then these outcomes of anti-transcendence may offer some insight into the presuicidal state. Thorsness in particular noted how after he "broke" under torture he saw himself as a "failure," and could not hold his head up with his fellow POWs.

This study in particular had very limited access to anti-transcendence, as the memoirs were written by service members with known resilience. However, I was able to track and analyze some instances of anti-transcendence and its outcomes, which confirmed that there is a downside risk to not establishing meaning for personally relevant, extraordinarily negative events that suspend one's everyday heuristic.

Is transcendence a meaning-making process?

The results of this study suggest that transcendence can be conceptualized and tracked in narrative as a meaning-making process rather than an event or state of being. Events, when they are personally relevant, extraordinary (positively or negatively), and suspend one's everyday heuristic, will trigger an attempt to establish meaning to it. Success in establishing meaning to such events have been shown to result in either stabilization of one's sense of self or making extraordinary connections within and beyond the self, in time and space. These extraordinary

⁵ Jean M. Twenge et al, "Social Exclusion and the Deconstructed State: Time Perception, Meaninglessness, Lethargy, Lack of Emotion, and Self-Awareness," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 85:3 (2003): 410.

connections often also establish coordinates in moral states for the person, which the individual refers to in future situations that might be morally challenging.

Failure to make meaning even after the three phase gates were passed (personally relevant, extraordinary [transcendent or anti-transcendent], and suspend everyday heuristic) results in the opposite outcomes of successful meaning-making: destabilization of one's sense of self and/or severing of extraordinary connections within and beyond the self. Anti-transcendence, as anti-process, deserves more attention in the literature, particularly as it might be expressed in written form.

Implications of these findings

This study focused on American service members with known resilience to trauma. Among other traumas, all the memoirists studied here were held captive as prisoners of war, over two time periods, World War II and the Vietnam War. The spectrum of abuse experienced in the different camps varied, but we know from the existing literature that the experiences in Japanese- and Vietnamese-run camps were collectively worse than those experienced in Germany. Although the Geneva Conventions and Code of Conduct were mentioned by the memoirists as reminders of their duties and of their captors' obligations, there was no significant difference between the World War II and Vietnam War memoirists in their references to either of these. For example, the World War II memoirists did not have access to the Code of Conduct, since it was developed after the Korean War. They would have only referred to the Geneva Conventions. The Vietnam memoirists memorized the Code of Conduct which appeared to be a stronger creed of personal identity and moral obligation. However, they did not seem to prefer to refer to it in their

memoirs over the Geneva Conventions. In fact, all three Vietnam War memoirists mentioned the Geneva Conventions more frequently than they mentioned the Code of Conduct.

While each person's experience of being a prisoner of war was in many ways unique, transcendence, as a *process* of making meaning, did occur with each of the resilient American service members studied. Meaning was established not only for extraordinary, transcendent events, but also for those extraordinary events with anti-transcendent markers (e.g., loss of freedom, breaking points during torture, and witnessing the death of a friend) and those that carried both transcendent and anti-transcendent markers (e.g., homecomings, natural beauty encountered during forced labor, or connecting with citizen families of the country that held them captive). When meaning was not established, we could see evidence of either destabilization of one's sense of self or severing of extraordinary connections within and beyond the self. This has implications for a person's ability to heal and rebound after experiencing traumatic events.

The results of this study challenge existing notions of transcendence as an event or state of being. The study also offers a possible method of tracing transcendence as a process and detecting instances of anti-transcendence in written narrative form, as well as the outcomes of anti-transcendence. The resilient American service members in this study, who survived a traumatic event and wrote about it later, all appear to process transcendent and anti-transcendent events in ways that yield similar results when successful, whether in regard to one's sense of self or to extraordinary connections within and beyond the self. Although resilience may not necessarily equal immunity to such symptoms as post-traumatic stress (as in Sirianni's case), transcendence and resilience together may be intertwined in ways that contribute to more robust coping or adaptive behavior, such as Sirianni's decisions to tell his story and seek professional

help for his symptoms after recognizing their persistence. This may also contribute to a broader concept of well-being, like the notions of human thriving or human flourishing.

From the perspective of religion and culture studies, the question remains as to whether transcendence as a meaning-making process is culturally contingent, and how the capacity to transcend may or may not influence religiosity. Revisiting Meerten B. Ter Borg's notion that religiousness is one "almost inescapable consequence of the capacity to transcend," he also posits that it is not the only possible outcome. Man as *animal transcendens* can also be atheist or agnostic. We have seen in this study that transcendence among these resilient POW memoirists does not always necessarily translate into increased religiosity or religiousness. While the Vietnam War memoirists made more explicit references to prayer, God, and their importance to them in meaning-making during and after these experiences, this was often not mentioned among the World War II memoirists held in the Japanese- or German-run camps. For example, Biggs (Northern China, Japan) does not mention God or prayer once in his memoir. Although Jefferson (Germany) mentioned "God" twice in his memoir, one instance was a prayer to get out of his father's business and the other was his comment on German cartoon satirizing Roosevelt, where he is depicted praying, "Dear God, bless our profits that our brave boys have not died in vain."

There were some exceptions among the WWII memoirists, however. Zinke (Japan) arguably had a mystical experience, that is, a feeling of being near God, as defined in the Beauregard and Paquette (2006) study, and he was able to rest and forget where he was momentarily. Gordon (Japan) noted in his chapter on the fall of Bataan how, as their positions were assaulted on 3 April 1942 he and other Catholics wanted to make peace with God as they received communion, thinking they would soon be dead. He also mentioned praying when he saw the memorial to his friend and fellow service member Harvey decades later.

Yet these reflections on God and prayer among the World War II memoirists were not thematically extant as they were in the Vietnam War POW memoirs. For example, McCain said that prayer helped throughout his imprisonment. Thorsness and Rowe both cited Psalm 23 as having special meaning in a way that carried them through their experiences. The Lord's Prayer grew in meaning over time for Thorsness, especially after that fateful day when all the prisoners decided to pray it together, even when five of their senior officers were pulled for torture before they finished it.

The consistent reference to God and prayer among the Vietnam War memoirists in comparison with the almost muted or absent mention of the same among the World War II memoirists is one of the most striking findings of this study. What was it about the Vietnam War POW experience that made God and prayer an explicit part of meaning-making for these resilient service members? How was it different from the World War II POW experiences in Japan, which were similarly debilitating? It is possible that the collection of memoirists reflected a coincidental grouping of more religious Vietnam veterans and a less religious grouping of World War II veterans. A more exhaustive narrative study of resilient American service members who survived a POW experience would need to be performed to answer this question, at least partially.

Where do we go from here?

One possible future step would be to replicate this study for resilient service members who survived a traumatic event and wrote about it, perhaps in a more recent time period. Other platforms for tracking transcendence could be studied as well, such as interviews, artwork, or music. People other than service members could also be studied to test whether transcendence as

meaning-making process tracks similarly for them. George W. Bush, for example, painted portraits of the service members he sent to combat who were killed or injured, which some have suggested might have been therapeutic for him as he wrestled with his own “moral injury,” part of the experience of sending service members into combat.⁶

We need to study additional narratives that reflect the outcomes of anti-transcendence: namely, the destabilization of one’s sense of self and the disintegration or severing of extraordinary connections within and beyond the self. A corpus of narratives that has been under-studied and could shed light on this, particularly for the American veteran and service member community, would be the suicide letters left behind by service members or veterans that, sadly, successfully ended their own lives. In a 2011 dissertation entitled, “The Language of Suicide Notes,” Jess Jann Shapero found that among other things, suicide notes have a greater than normal use of negatives, discourse markers, maximum quantity terms, and intensifiers.⁷ Perhaps building a corpus of genuine suicide notes in the American service member population and studying them for patterns of destabilization of sense of self, severing of extraordinary ties within and beyond the self, and loss of orientation in moral space, will provide additional insight into anti-transcendence. Additionally, such analyses could point to patterned obstacles that prevent healing from painful memories.

A final word about transcendence: although this study is limited to the examination of transcendence at a personal level, there is also support for the notion that it can occur at a collective level. Emile Durkheim, in his discussion of collective effervescence, defined as a form of collective consciousness that occurs in religious ritual, said that a “synthesis *sui generis* of

⁶ Aaron Gell, “George W Bush Opens Up About Veterans, Iraq, And The Healing Power of Art,” Mar. 3, 2017, Task and Purpose website, accessed May 5, 2017, <http://taskandpurpose.com/art-war-george-w-bush-painting-patriotism-hacked-guccifer/>.

⁷ Jess Jann Shapero, “The Language of Suicide Notes” (PhD diss., The University of Birmingham, 2011): 248.

particular consciousness is required.”⁸ This synthesis, he says, “has the effect of disengaging a whole world of sentiments, ideas and images which, once born, obey laws all their own.”⁹ The resulting collective consciousness then appears to have a system and life of its own, different from individual consciousness. Peter Berger, although he did not directly address the notion of transcendence, made three observations that are relevant to the idea that transcendence is a native dimension of the human experience, individually and collectively. First, world-building is a biological imperative for the human person: “The world-building of man is not a biologically extraneous phenomenon, but the direct consequence of man’s biological constitution.”¹⁰ Second, world-building by the individual man is never separated from society: “Man’s world-building activity is always a collective enterprise. Man’s internal appropriation of the world must also take place in a collectivity.”¹¹ Third, in the process of world-building, “man, by his own activity, specializes his drives and provides stability for himself.”¹² I point this out here to show that there may be much more to transcendence when compared between the individual and collective levels; the potentially therapeutic outcomes of stabilizing one’s sense of self and making extraordinary connections within and beyond the self may exhibit phenomenal effects if the process is adopted organizationally, with due care to maintain the integrity of a person’s religious, cultural, and ethnic senses of identity. If, in future studies, transcendence can be identified more strongly as a positive predictor of resilience, it may play a role as a therapeutic mechanism, individually and perhaps even on a more communal level.

⁸ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (New York: Free Press, 1965): 471.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, 5.

¹¹ Ibid, 16.

¹² Ibid, 6.

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