

Lt. Robert Goodman: The mission that brought him home

Story by MC2(AW) Jonathan W. Hutto Sr.

On Dec 4, 1983, Lt. Robert Goodman Jr., a Navy navigator bombardier attached to Carrier Air Wing III aboard USS *John F. Kennedy*, and his partner Lt. Mark Lang, were shot down in the mountains east of Beirut, Lebanon. Lang and Goodman were part of a contingent comprised of 28 war planes retaliating against Syria attacking U.S. aircraft a day prior. They ejected from their A-6 *Intruder* after it was hit by a Syrian ground missile. Lang suffered a leg injury and died after being found by the Syrians.

Goodman was also found by Syrian soldiers with three broken ribs, an injured shoulder and knee.

In this incident, Goodman became the first American prisoner of war (POW) since the end of the Vietnam War.

Upon being found, Goodman was taken to a military compound in Damascus, Syria. He would eventually be fed three times a day and brought books to read by his captors.

The Naval Academy, naval flight officer training and POW training at the survival, evasion, resistance and escape school had prepared Goodman for his captivity. He faced deprivation and physical and psychological pressure. In accordance with the Code of Conduct, he understood his job was to evade the enemy giving vague answers and never compromising national security.

Goodman also understood the sacrifice of service to country. The son of a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel, Goodman was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, in 1956. Due to his father's service, Goodman was accustomed to moving frequently in his childhood settling in Portsmouth, N.H., as a teenager. His role models growing up were his father and the late Air Force Gen. Daniel "Chappie" James, the first African-American four-star general. As a youth, Goodman always envisioned himself as a Navy pilot.

Upon learning of Goodman's capture, Secretary of Defense Caspar



▲ Lt Robert Goodman, accompanied by Rev. Jesse L. Jackson, Sr., arrive at Andrews Air-Force Base, Md., on Jan. 4, 1984. Goodman had been held captive in Syria as a Prisoner of War (POW).

Weinberger attempted to open negotiations to secure Goodman's release to no avail. The Syrians were determined to use Goodman to force the United States to remove all troops from Lebanon.

The negotiations were at a stalemate until civil rights leader and then-presidential candidate, Rev. Jesse L. Jackson, Sr., sent a telegram to President Al-Assad advocating the release of Goodman as a humanitarian measure. Assad responded with an open invitation to Jackson and a delegation of his choosing to visit Damascus to discuss the release of Goodman.

In Syria, Jackson was allowed to meet with the imprisoned pilot. Goodman described himself as

comfortable and had only one request – to be sent home to his family.

On Jan. 3, 1984, a day after meeting with Assad, Goodman was released. The Syrian government stated Goodman's release was in response to Jackson's human appeal and to the demands of the U.S. government.

President Ronald Reagan dispatched a plane to return Goodman and Jackson's delegation to Andrews Air Force Base, Md. Goodman stated on the flight his intention to stay clear of politics.

"I'm a naval officer, not a hero," Goodman remembered Lang saying. "It's just a matter of fate that it happens to be me sitting here, instead of Mark."

Reagan held a hero's welcome for Lt. Goodman in the Rose Garden of the White House, he thanked Jackson for making the trip to Lebanon, and Goodman for his courage under difficult circumstances.

After his return, Goodman was assigned to Attack Squadron 85 in Oceana, Va. He went on to graduate from the Naval Postgraduate School in 1987 receiving a masters of science in systems technology. Goodman retired from the Navy in 1995 as a commander. **ES**

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