

Armed With Only Needle and Thread

Toward the end of the war, the Vietnamese guards who held us as prisoners of war allowed us to receive modest Red Cross packages that included articles of clothing. Mike Christian, a small town Alabama kid who enlisted in the Navy when he was 17, fashioned a needle out of bamboo, took red and white scraps of cloth from the packages and sewed an American flag onto the inside of his blue prisoner's shirt.

Every afternoon, before we ate our soup, we would hang Mike's flag on the wall of our cell and together we'd recite the Pledge of Allegiance. No other event of the day had as much meaning for us.

One afternoon, the guards discovered Mike's flag and confiscated it. That evening, they came back. As punishment for us as much as for him, they beat him severely just outside our cell, puncturing his eardrum and breaking several of his ribs. When they had finished with him, they dragged him bleeding and nearly senseless back into our cell.

We helped Mike crawl to his place on the sleeping platform, and cleaned him up the best we could. Then we settled down to try to sleep.

As I was drifting off, I happened to look toward a corner of the room lit by one of four bulbs that always stayed on. There in the dim light was Mike Christian. He had crawled there after he thought we had fallen asleep. With his eyes nearly swollen shut from the beating, he picked up his needle and thread and began sewing a new flag.

-- Senator John McCain