1973
January 27: A cease-fire is signed in Paris between North and South Vietnam. Americans have lost 58,000 men in the war, with far more wounded. Over the span of the war, the United States has spent over $150 billion.

February 12: The first POWs to be released under the cease-fire go home.

March 29: Only 24 hours behind schedule, the last of the known 591 American POWs leave Hanoi. The men are flown to Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines, where they are greeted with cheers. They receive medical examinations, new uniforms, and for the first time since their captivity, all the servings of food they want. For many Americans, the POWs’ return home marks the final chapter of the country’s involvement in the Vietnam War.

1975
South Vietnam falls to the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong. After thirty years of revolutionary civil wars and repeated conflicts against colonial powers, peace comes to Vietnam.
The Hanoi March

On the morning of July 6, 1966, prisoners at "Briarpatch" and the "Zoo," two prisoner of war camps west of Hanoi, were rounded up in the morning and given shirts with numbers. In late afternoon, the gathered American prisoners, blindfolded and handcuffed in pairs, were loaded onto trucks and driven to a sports stadium in downtown Hanoi. The men from the two prisons, 52 in all, were addressed by a man nicknamed "Rabbit," an indoctrinator from the Hanoi prison of Hoa Lo. He told the American soldiers they were about to "meet the Vietnamese people."

Despite not knowing exactly what lay ahead, the men -- a dozen of whom had been in isolation -- were thrilled to see their comrades. The men communicated in code by tapping on their handcuffs. The joy of human contact ended when "Rabbit" barked the command to move out.

Red-scarved guards flanked the prisoners, who were marched two-by-two into a waiting crowd. Rabbit ordered the men to bow their heads, but U.S. Commander Jeremiah Denton and others passed the word to stand tall. The men were first led past the Soviet and Chinese embassies and then were brought down the city's main avenue, which was lined by a mob that one soldier estimated to have 100,000 people.

Before long, screaming spectators began breaking past the guards to hit, kick, and spit at the men. Bottles were thrown, and more than once the dazed prisoners were beaten to the ground. The brutal gauntlet extended for about two miles, an hour-long ordeal. As the prisoners were led back to the stadium, the attacking crowds broke into a riot. In his book, *With God in a POW Camp*, survivor Ralph Gaither said he and another prisoner recited the 23rd Psalm the final 100 yards back to the stadium. Almost all the men sustained head and facial injuries, nursing loosened teeth, broken noses and swollen eyes; one even had a partial hernia. After another half-hour of terror, about the time it took guards to disperse the crowds, the men were loaded onto trucks and driven back to the two prison camps.

The event had been planned by the North Vietnamese to win support for their cause. It was staged to produce film footage that would convince the world that the American prisoners were war criminals deserving of derision. They expected that an angry yet orderly Hanoi crowd would be shown jeering shamed American soldiers. Instead, the footage, broadcast to the world, showed manacled prisoners trying to protect their dignity and safety under assault from a mob.

U.S. officials quickly condemned the march, noting it was another violation of the Geneva Conventions. U.S. officials also took the opportunity to condemn the North Vietnamese threat that they would try American prisoners for war crimes. The march was denounced internationally as well, as was the Communist threat of war crimes trials. Prime Ministers Indira Gandhi of India and Harold Wilson of Great Britain lobbied the Soviet Union to restrain the North Vietnamese. United Nations Secretary General U Thant registered his disapproval of the POW treatment, as did Pope Paul VI and the World Council of Churches.

After the criticism, Ho Chi Minh and the Communists pulled back on their threat of trials. The propaganda from the North took a decisive shift. Ho told visiting journalists that the "main criminals" were not captured pilots "but the persons who send them there -- Johnson, Rusk, McNamara -- these are the ones who should be brought to trial." Reaction to the march apparently changed North Vietnamese policy and no war crime trials were ever held. The march itself also drew attention to an issue that until this time had received scant notice from the press and even from the highest levels of the U.S. government: the treatment of American POWs in Vietnam.
The Consolidation of POWs

One of the ironies in the history of the American POWs in Vietnam is that their lives were improved dramatically by a failed rescue mission. On November 20, 1970, a small group of Air Force and Special Forces volunteers dropped into the Son Tay prison, located just 23 miles from Hanoi. It took only minutes before the commandos killed the 200 soldiers in the towers, broke into cells, and escaped in waiting helicopters. The raid would have been hailed back in Washington if not for one major problem: all the American prisoners in Son Tay had been evacuated from the camp four months previously. In fact, prisoners transferred to nearby Dan Hoí listened to U.S. fighter planes screaming overhead and watched explosive flashes light up the sky the night of the raid.

The mission was a political disaster in Washington, but the failure actually improved the lives of American POWs. The North Vietnamese, shocked by the near-success of the attempt, moved all of the POWs from less secure outlying areas and concentrated them in Hanoi. Prisoners were rounded up in the "Hanoi Hilton," the facility in which American prisoners had first experienced captivity. Conditions were as bad as returned soldiers had remembered them. Said U.S. Commander Howard Rutledge: "The place was as bleak and cold and filthy as ever... It was like a bad dream."

What did change, however, was that the men, more concentrated and numerous than ever, were no longer isolated. The prisoners were housed in groups of 20 to 50 in large, open rooms. "Being in that room with forty other roommates was just the most wonderful medicine that anybody could ever give you," said Major George Day. Instead of having to tap on walls to make contact, the POWs congregated in rooms and courtyards, talking and organizing as they had been unable to do previously. Two men -- Rutledge and Commander Harry Jenkins -- who had only known each other through tapping during four years of imprisonment, came face to face. "That was something else," Rutledge said, remembering the first time the two shook hands. "We knew each other intimately through our covert communication efforts." The men played card games, exercised together and even organized a toastmaster. Soldiers taught each other whatever they knew, including French, Spanish, history, real estate, and dairy farming.

Information spread through the camp to prisoners who had gone for years without hearing any news of the outside world. Soldiers published abbreviated daily editions of any news the prisoners received. The "Vegas Gambler" was a newspaper printed on strips of toilet paper. It announced the Six Day War in the Middle East and the landing of men on the moon ("U.S. made jump like cow," read the news.) The "newspaper" was delivered from cell to cell. Said Lieutenant Commander Richard Stratton: "As strange as it sounds, it was a quality life."
Read the excerpt from *In Love and War* and the People & Events entries on the *Hanoi March* and the *consolidation of the POWs*. (a) How did Sybil Stockdale and other wives of American POWs help change U.S. policy toward the POWs? (b) What information suggests that the North Vietnamese were sensitive to negative publicity regarding their treatment of POWs? (c) What other, unconnected event led to an improvement in the lives of the POWs?
The Tap Code

One of the most important parts of a POW's life was communicating with his fellow captives. The first communication between isolated prisoners of war may have been a name scrawled on a piece of toilet paper with the burnt end of a matchstick. Notes and whispers were attempted, but both were often detected and severely punished.

In June 1965, four POWs -- Captain Carlyle ("Smitty") Harris, Lieutenant Phillip Butler, Lieutenant Robert Peel and Lieutenant Commander Robert Shumaker -- who were imprisoned in the same cell in Hoa Lo devised a simple, secretive code. The four men, expecting to be split up again, vowed to continue their resistance. To do so, they knew communicating closely would be essential.

Harris remembered an Air Force instructor who had shown him a secret code based on a five-by-five alphabet matrix. Each letter was communicated by tapping two numbers: the first designated the horizontal row and the second designated the vertical row. The letter W, for example, would be 5-2; the letter H would be 2-3. The letter x was used to break up sentences and the letter "c" replaced the letter "k." (One of the famous, yet inelegant, usages of the letter "c" for "k" was in the transmission "Joan Baez Succa," which POWs sent around the camp after the American anti-war activist's songs were played over the camp's public address system.) Here is the way the alphabet code was set up:

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<td>V</td>
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<td>X</td>
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The guards separated the four prisoners after one was caught passing a note, and thus inadvertently spread the code, as the separated men taught it to others. By August 1965, most of the prisoners had been initiated, and were passing messages by tapping on the walls to fellow prisoners. "The building sounded like a den of runaway woodpeckers," recalled POW Ron Bliss.

POW Vice Admiral James Stockdale, recalling the code in the book he wrote with his wife Sybil, *In Love and War*, recalls sending the code: "Our tapping ceased to be just an exchange of letters and words; it became conversation. Elation, sadness, humor, sarcasm, excitement, depression -- all came through."

Stockdale also talks of the pleasures of coming up with abbreviations, a necessity imposed by the time constraints on both the message giver and receiver. "Passing on abbreviations like conundrums got to be a kind of game," remembered Stockdale. "What would ST mean right after GN? 'Sleep tight,' of course. And DLTBBB? I laughed to think what our friends back home would think of us two old fighter pilots (Stockdale refers to Air Force Major Samuel Johnson, in an adjoining cell) standing at a wall, checking for shadows under the door, pecking out a final message for the day with our fingernails: 'Don't let the bedbugs bite.'"

Some of the acronyms entered POW popular usage. One acronym, GBU, was used as a universal...
sign-off. It was shorthand for "God Bless You."
Vietnam’s Missing in Action

One of the lingering and deeply troubling aftermaths of any war is the unknown fate of those listed as missing in action (MIA). These individuals were killed on the battlefield unseen, or died as prisoners, or met with other misfortune. What they all have in common is that they have disappeared and their bodies have not been found.

"When someone is killed, there's finality," says Ann Mills Griffiths, executive director of the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia. "With those who are missing, there's uncertainty. It's harder to know when to give up hope and when to begin grieving." Griffiths is also sister to Vietnam MIA Lt. Commander James B. Mills of the U.S. Navy Reserves.

Since the League was officially founded in 1970, it has pushed the U.S. government to make the "fullest possible accounting" of the 2,583 MIAs missing in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia at war’s end.

"Our nation has an obligation to stand behind those who serve," Griffiths says. "That means that if someone becomes captured or missing every reasonable effort is made to account for them." It's a case that many active duty men also are invested in, Griffiths notes. "They want to know that if something happens to them, they won’t be left behind."

A more serious search for MIAs began with President Ronald Reagan's election in 1980 and has continued since that time. "On any given day, there are five hundred men and women in the Department of Defense looking for MIAs around the world," notes Larry Greer, spokesman for the Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office. To date, the remains of nearly 600 MIAs from the Vietnam War have been identified.

No MIAs have been found alive, despite alleged sightings that inspire the hopes of some relatives. "Nobody is under any illusion that lots of people are still alive," says Griffiths. "The vast majority of families are very realistic. But until we get answers, questions remain."

Most efforts now are concentrated on locating and then identifying remains. Co-operative search programs exist with Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Korea, and even Central Europe and Russia (there are 124 Cold War MIAs as well). One of the spillovers from the MIA search in Vietnam is the belated search for MIAs from other wars (8,100 Americans were lost in the Korean War, and 78,000 in World War II). Since 1996, when North Korea opened up its borders to excavation teams, the remains of over 70 American servicemen from that war have been recovered. Once political channels are opened, military personnel conduct interviews with veterans who may have clues about disappearances, and also comb domestic military records and those of one-time enemies. Greer describes it as "a massive detective hunt for people who might have been lost thirty, forty or fifty years ago."

The detective work may lead to a particular rice paddy or battlefield. Ground-penetrating radar can be used to locate and detect buried bodies. When evidence is strong, an onsite excavation is done.

If remains are found, scientists go to work. "Computers now play a huge role in identification of remains," says Greer. One computer program, only a few years old, enables forensic dentists to match one single tooth to thousands of dental records, something that was nearly impossible to do before computers. The technique has helped identify old as well as newer remains, Greer says. When only bone fragments are found, anthropologists stationed in Hanoi determine if they are human bones, and if so, if they are Asian. If not, they are presumed American. But before they are flown to the Central Identification Lab in Honolulu, former soldiers are placed in flag-covered, coffin-like containers draped with a U.S. flag and honored with a silent honor guard escort. Greer says that the remains of hundreds of MIAs have been identified by matching their mitochondrial DNA to the DNA of someone from their maternal line.

Since the push by the United States to find MIAs, other nations also have begun to search more vigorously for their MIAs. In Vietnam, more than 300,000 troops are still unaccounted for. Dr. Tran Van Ban, who buried hundreds of North Vietnamese soldiers during the war, has made it his mission to help identify the remains of both comrades and former enemies from the war. So far, he...
has helped locate more than 600 soldiers.

"I'm sad that the number I've found is so small compared to the number of mothers and fathers dreaming of finding their children," Ban once said. It's a feeling that loved ones of MIAs from any war are certain to understand.

The Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office
Visit this web site for up-to-date information on personnel missing from the conflicts in Southeast Asia. This office is a part of the U.S. Department of Defense.
http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo/pmsea/pmsea_summary.htm
The Release of the POWs

In the days following the signing of the peace accord on January 27, 1973, the American prisoners of war got word that the war was over. Camp officers read the news from prepared texts stating that the men would be released 120 at a time at two-week intervals. The sick and wounded were scheduled to depart first; the others would follow in the order in which they were captured.

As the men were dismissed following the announcement at Hoa Lo, Lt. Colonel Robinson Risner about-faced and called to the 400 men, "Fourth Allied POW Wing, atten-hut!" Lt. Gerald Coffee remembered the men's reaction. "The thud of eight hundred rubber-tire sandals coming together smartly was awesome." Squadron commanders returned the salute and then dismissed their units with a unified "Squadron, dis... missed!"

Some were reluctant to believe the news. Coffee's squadron commander Lt. Everett Alvarez, in captivity for 8 1/2 years, said to Coffee: "You know, I've been up and down so many times over the years that I'm not sure what to think. It looks good, everything seems right, but I'll believe it when I see it. I'm not ready to party it up... yet."

Those who believed the announcement was true had a wide variety of reactions. Coffee said that "some men were exchanging a wink and a smile or a light punch on the shoulders, but most, with minds racing onto themselves, already projected themselves twelve thousand miles away and considered the joyful and spooky prospect of reunions with loved ones." POW Sam Johnson remembers his group at Hoa Lo "ran to each other, hugging and crying and whooping with joy." At the another Hanoi prison camp, Plantation, Al Stafford felt "a kind of emptiness which changed, slowly, to profound, bottomless fatigue." He explained afterwards that he had never felt so tired and so vacant in his life, which expressed itself in a deep desire to go back to his cell and sleep.

With the peace, the persistently austere POW conditions were finally relaxed. The men were given letters from families that had been withheld for months and years, along with supplies and other presents from home, including MAD magazine. The prisoners started receiving fresh supplies of bread and vegetables, canned meat and fish, undoubtedly attempts by the North Vietnamese to get the men looking better.

In the hours and days before their release, POWs imagined their future lives. Alvarez daydreamed of "returning to a normal life" in which "we would make our own decisions and set our own agendas. The expectation of normal, daily activities -- getting in a car and cruising down a highway or rolling in a haystack -- filled him with "tingling anticipation. I would get up whenever I pleased, make my own selection of clothing, eat whatever I wanted, and go wherever I fancied."

The last evening in Hoa Lo, Vietnamese guards gave the American prisoners their going-away clothes. Coffee recalled that his fellow soldiers eyed the clothes "like a bunch of little kids in a toy store." They played with the zippers on their jackets and laced and unlaced shoelaces that "we hadn't seen... for years." The men were given small black tote bags to carry what they had -- cigarettes, toiletries and gifts they'd received, Some snuck in a souvenir of captivity. For Alvarez, this was a tin drinking cup he said he had used "for so long that it had taken on the sentimental value of a baby's cup."

As promised, the men were released in shifts, with those believed to be the last group leaving Vietnam on March 29, 1973. However, on that same day, the Viet Cong announced that Army Capt. Robert White, unaccounted for since his disappearance in November 1969, was still in captivity. Years later White would say "they just plain forgot about me" until his captors reminded superiors about him. He was released a few days later, and was the last known surviving U.S. POW from the Vietnam War.
Decades later, Marines hunt Vietnam-era deserters

By Bill Nichols, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — In the summer of 1965, Marine Cpl. Jerry Texiero quietly disappeared from his California base, plagued by personal demons and a mounting opposition to the Vietnam War.

Forty years later, in the summer of 2005, Texiero — now known as Gerome Conti — was taken into custody by police in Tarpon Springs, Fla., after the Marine Corps tracked him down.

Thirty years after the war ended, hundreds of Vietnam-era deserters are still on the loose. Conti’s attorneys, Louis Font and Tod Ensign, say the Pentagon, and the Marine Corps in particular, are cracking down on long-term cases in an effort to warn current-day troops in Iraq against deserting.

“My view is that the Marines are trying to send a message to people in the ranks today that they, too, will be required to participate in a war, whether they think it’s illegal or immoral,” Font says. (Related story: 8,000 desert during Iraq war)

Conti, 65, says he was surprised. “I thought they couldn’t possibly be looking for me anymore. I would think they would have stopped looking for anybody who had been gone as long as I had.”

Conti was held for five months — four in solitary confinement — then given an other-than-honorable discharge.
January. If he had been court-martialed and convicted, he could have faced three years in the brig and a dishonorable discharge.

McQueen was Ernest Johnson Jr. when he left Camp Lejeune, N.C., in November 1969 because of concerns about Vietnam. McQueen, 55, also was discharged without disciplinary action.

In 1974, President Ford offered clemency to Vietnam draft resisters and deserters. Only 27,000 of 350,000 eligible offers expired on April 1, 1975. In 1977, President Carter pardoned those who dodged the war by not registering or fleeing the country. Neither Conti nor McQueen applied for the Ford pardon. Both spent decades hiding their past from families and employers. McQueen kept his military experience from two wives and two children, and even Conti's best friend in Fort Worth, Elaine Smith, knew nothing of his history with the Marines.

Conti says his decision to desert was a combination of lingering emotional scars from a childhood lived in foster homes and concerns about stories he also was hearing about Vietnam.

Special Agent Tom Lorang of the Air Force Office of Special Investigations (OSI) says most older desertion cases are closed after an initial investigation is completed, although some are re-examined.

Except for the Marine Corps, military officials say long-term cases normally are closed when deserters voluntarily come forward or are stopped by civilian law officials, not through efforts to track them down.

That's not Conti's or McQueen's story. Conti says he was told his file was reopened and his fingerprints were run through national database. He was in the database because he had been convicted of fraud and theft in 1998. He was on probation, paying restitution when the Marines caught up with him.

McQueen, a carpenter, says his former brother-in-law was called by Marine investigators, and he told them where to find him. "This kind of guilt put me in a financial bind," says McQueen, who had been doing carpentry for a church when he was arrested for fraud and theft.

"They just need to declare amnesty for everybody from a certain time back or from certain conflicts," says Elaine Smith, Conti's best friend. "These guys ... just had issues, as we all did back in the '60s."

Military officials maintain that those who deserted the service are liable under law, no matter how unpopular a war was. "We actively investigate all cases of desertion," says Fred Hall, a spokesman for the Naval Personnel Command. "For each active deserter we have on our rolls -- 1,190 as of 31 Jan. '06 -- there is a federal warrant out for their arrest."

Nine in 1,000 went AWOL in fiscal 2007; seven in 1,000 a year earlier

The Associated Press
updated 12:41 p.m. ET,Fri., Nov. 16, 2007

WASHINGTON - Soldiers strained by six years at war are deserting their posts at the highest rate since 1980, with the number of Army deserters this year showing an 80 percent increase since the United States invaded Iraq in 2003.

While the totals are still far lower than they were during the Vietnam War, when the draft was in effect, they show a steady increase over the past four years and a 42 percent jump since last year.

"We're asking a lot of soldiers these days," said Roy Wallace, director of plans and resources for Army personnel. "They're humans. They have all sorts of issues back home and other places like that. So, I'm sure it has to do with the stress of being a soldier."

The Army defines a deserter as someone who has been absent without leave for longer than 30 days. The soldier is then discharged as a deserter.

According to the Army, about nine in every 1,000 soldiers deserted in fiscal year 2007, which ended Sept. 30, compared to nearly seven per 1,000 a year earlier. Overall, 4,698 soldiers deserted this year, compared to 3,301 last year.

The increase comes as the Army continues to bear the brunt of the war demands with many soldiers serving repeated, lengthy tours in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Military leaders -- including Army Chief of Staff Gen. George Casey -- have acknowledged that the Army has been stretched nearly to the breaking point by the combat. Efforts are under way to increase the size of the Army and Marine Corps to lessen the burden and give troops more time off between deployments.

"We have been concentrating on this," said Wallace. "The Army can't afford to throw away good people. We have got to work with those individuals and try to help them become good soldiers."

Still, he noted that "the military is not for everybody, not everybody can be a soldier." And those who want to leave the service will find a way to do it, he said.

3 of 4 in first term
While the Army does not have an up-to-date profile of deserters, more than 75 percent of them are soldiers in their first term of enlistment. And most are male.

Soldiers can sign on initially for two to six years. Wallace said he did not know whether deserters were more likely to be those who enlisted for a short or long tour.

At the same time, he said that even as desertions have increased, the Army has seen some overall success in keeping first-term soldiers in the service.