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Donald J. Rander Dies; Was POW in Vietnam for 5 Years

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Donald J. Rander, 66, who spent five years and two months in a North Vietnamese prisoner-of-war camp and then made a career in Army counterintelligence work, died of complications of lung cancer April 21 at Malcolm Randall VA Medical Center in Gainesville, Fla.

He was a longtime resident of Rockville and Glen Burnie.

Chief Warrant Officer Rander was the assistant special agent in charge of the Army's field office in Hue when the Vietnamese city was overrun during the Tet Offensive in January 1968. He was part of a small group of soldiers who held off the attack for two days, until they ran out of ammunition.

"It was like Custer's last stand," he later recalled for the Special Military Intelligence Activities Team's Web site. "All the North Vietnamese in the world seemed to be outside the door."

Only seven U.S. soldiers lived



Donald J. Rander is reunited with his then-wife Andrea in 1973 after his release from a North Vietnamese prisoner-of-war camp. (Associated Press)



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to surrender. They later said they were dragged through the city's streets, then stuffed into a shower stall for the night. Chief Warrant Officer Rander and two others were forced to walk barefoot to a North Vietnamese camp, which badly bruised and bloodied his feet.

Posing as a civilian contractor, he was held in isolation for most of his first year as a prisoner. He was beaten, his legs were put in stocks and he was forced to stand or kneel at attention for hours on end.

"My training as an altar boy came in handy, but frankly, it wasn't adequate," he told author Tom Philpott, who quoted him in "Glory Denied: The Saga of Jim Thompson, America's Longest-Held Prisoner of War" (2001).

When asked about military commanders, Chief Warrant Officer Rander used names from the roster of the 1951 Dodgers. He pleaded ignorance by using the communists' own propaganda: "Don't you realize that I'm just a black man, the white man don't tell me nothing?"

He was moved several times during his five years of captivity.

"They took us to a camp we called Skid Row," he told Yvonne Latty, author of "We Were There: Voices of African American Veterans from World War II to the War in Iraq" (2004). "It was formerly a Buddhist monastery, and I was in solitary confinement there. . . . Even though it was a tropical country, it was the coldest I've ever been. I was chilled to the bone." Because of those chills, he came down with a fever about once a month.

He later told The Washington Post that he wasn't supposed to be in Vietnam on the day he was captured. He had just finished a four-year hitch and had reenlisted, which merited him a free month back in the United States. He delayed leaving until February to be home for four family birthdays that month. He was captured the day before he was to leave.

In a war in which most captured U.S. prisoners were white, college-educated Air Force and Navy officers, Chief Warrant Officer Rander was black, enlisted and Army. He was usually the only African American in the POW camps, he said, and heard about the 1968 riots in Washington on his captors' radio; a guard taunted him, saying the CIA had killed the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

Born in the South Bronx, N.Y., he attended Adelphi College on Long Island before going to work for First National City Bank of New York, Capitol Airlines and British Overseas Airlines.

He was drafted into the Army in 1961 and trained as a military policeman, serving in France and in the United States. In 1965, he entered the Army's intelligence school, became an instructor and volunteered for duty in Vietnam in 1967. He had been in the country slightly more than two months when he was captured.

"I kept track of dates with little notches on the wall. It was important for me to remember my daughter's birthday, my wife's birthday, my mother's birthday, the date we got married, Christmas and New Year's. . . . It was a survival mechanism," he said.

He was released March 27, 1973, and reunited with his family three days later. A photo of his first kiss with his wife, on the tarmac of a Houston airport, made the national newswires.

Andrea Rander, who got one letter from her husband during his entire captivity, twice went to the Paris peace talks and begged the North Vietnamese delegation for information on soldiers missing in action. The couple divorced in 1993, and she said yesterday that she often thought of writing a book about their shared, yet different, experiences.

"He didn't know what I went through, and I didn't know what he went through," she said. "A small example: When he left, the nuns were wearing habits. When he came back, they were in street clothes."

Several months after his return, Chief Warrant Officer Rander was part of a committee of returned POWs who presented a study paper to the Army chief of staff. The paper helped influence the Defense Department's revision of its Uniform Code of Military Conduct.

He remained in the Army for the next 10 years, working in counterintelligence, stationed in Germany and the United States. He retired from the military in 1983, then remained as a civilian with the Army's Foreign Counterintelligence Agency in Maryland and Hawaii and with the Army Intelligence and Security Command Headquarters in Virginia. He retired in 2003 and moved to Palm Coast, Fla.

His first marriage, to Mary Taylor, ended in divorce.

Survivors include his wife of six years, Demetra A. Wells of Palm Coast; two children from his first marriage, Kim Jordan of Uniondale, N.Y., and Darryl Rander of the Bronx, N.Y.; a daughter from his second marriage, Page Rander of Friendswood, Tex.; two stepdaughters, Lysa Hall of Burtonsville and Joyce Lowery of Turrell, Ark.; a stepsister; and 21 grandchildren.