

Cole Black, 74; former Navy captain survived 7 years as a POW

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Cole Black of Escondido, who by his own count spent 2,428 days, 18 hours and 35 minutes as a POW in Vietnam, died Friday in a plane crash near Delano in the Central Valley.

Two others also died in the accident – Bruce Klein, the owner of several pizza restaurants in Oregon, who was flying the plane, and Sally S. Wilson, a retired schoolteacher – the *News-Review* newspaper in Douglas County, Ore., reported.

Black was flying in a Piper Aerostar twin-engine plane from Oregon to McClellan-Palomar Airport in Carlsbad. He had visited Roseburg, Ore., to speak to students about his experience as a prisoner of war. He would have turned 75 Nov. 28.

The plane crashed before noon in an orange grove after experiencing mechanical problems, said Karen Black, his second wife, from their home in Escondido.

Black, a former Navy captain, spent seven years as a POW. He was flying an F-8 Crusader on a mission over North Vietnam in June 1966 when a MiG fighter downed his plane. He was 33 years old, had a wife and two children and was one week away from going home.

He ejected from the plane and tried to hide in some tall grass. “I was captured almost instantly,” he told *The San Diego Union-Tribune* in a 2003 interview.

He was held in four prisons, including the infamous “Hanoi Hilton.”

“It's a feeling no one really knows,” Black said in the interview. “Nobody knows what it is like to totally lose your freedom and be reduced to nothing. You're thousands of miles from home and haven't got friend one.”

Black said he spent part of his time in a 7-by-9-foot cage, with a concrete slab for a bed. Twice a day, the guards served him meals – a dish of rice and boiled greens that grew in swampy, septic water.

He endured through his stoicism, his wife said Friday night. “He didn't get rattled. He also had “an honest belief that the country wouldn't let him down,” and he would be freed, she said.



Courtesy Karen Black
Cole and Karen Black smile during a POW reunion in 2004.

His strength carried him through terrible times. She said that shortly after he was captured, interrogators told him, “We will reduce you to a dog.”

His captors bound his arms so tightly that he still carried scars.

One of his worst moments occurred a month after his capture, said Karen Black, 69. He and other prisoners were forced to walk through the streets of Hanoi in a propaganda spectacle that became known as the Hanoi March. People began throwing rocks and hitting the POWs, who barely avoided being killed.

But it was during the march that Black learned of the code POWs used to communicate with one other. It would relieve what he told his wife was “hours of boredom interrupted things less desirable.”

Despite the misery, Black found a positive aspect to his imprisonment. “Not one among us would wish to get shot down again, but I think it changed my life for the better. I came back with a real zest to live. I wanted to do some things,” he said in a 2005 interview with the *Union-Tribune*.

Black and other POWs were released in February 1973. Karen Black said they knew they would be freed the day the guards removed the radios in prisoners' cells that were used to blare propaganda to torment the men.

Although Black was able to withstand his captivity, his marriage to his first wife could not. It fell apart within a month of his return, Karen Black said.

The emotional toll of coming home to a broken marriage was almost more difficult to deal with than his suffering in Vietnam, she said.

Many POWs experienced the same pain, which led Karen Black to write a novel based on the ruined marriages. She self-published the book “Code of Conduct” in 2002. Her research included listening to 12 hours of tapes in which her husband told military debriefers in 1973 about his time as a POW.

Karen Black met her husband-to-be Nov. 27, 1973, at Bully's East restaurant in Mission Valley, where each had arrived separately with friends to have a few drinks. She said they ended up talking for six hours.

“He was genuine, real, such a nice guy,” she said. They married in May 1976.

Cole Black was born Nov. 28, 1932. He was raised on a farm in Lake City, Minn. He joined the Navy as an enlisted man at age 17 so he could see the world, Karen Black said. He rose to petty officer first class in less than four years, and the Navy selected him to attend Officer Candidate School. He graduated in 1955 and earned his wings two years later.

He retired from the Navy in 1986, the same year he and Karen moved to Escondido. He attended National University and earned a master's in business and a real estate broker's license. He worked for High Point Realty in Escondido.

Black returned to Vietnam for a visit in 1994 after Karen bought tickets for a cruise. "It was the best vacation we ever had," she said.

They arrived at the "Hanoi Hilton" the day workers were tearing it down. The couple collected pieces of brick as mementos.

Black served for four years as president of NAM-POWs, the national fraternal association of repatriated Vietnam prisoners of war.

In addition to his wife, he is survived by daughters Christie Lambert of Geilenkirchen, Germany, and Stacy Edwards of Escondido; sons Rick Black of La Mesa, Doug Edwards of Tucson, Ariz., and Brad Edwards of Poway; brother, Marlin Black, and sister, Vonne Oliver, both of Lake City, Minn; nine grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.