land, you fly by low and then roll your airplane in an upward spiral which is just kind of like, I guess, kicking your heels up. Let everybody know that, hey, we did something great.

And so he approved it, and we both flew down the side of the ship, Rookie on the starboard side and — Rookie, that was Mike Rabb"s nickname—and Mike Rabb and Ken Crandall in one airplane on the right side of the ship, Mugs and I on the left-hand side of the ship. We did our Victory Roll and landed aboard. And, needless to say, the whole squadron and everybody was waiting for us with congratulations and it was a pretty exciting day in our naval career.

What made it double—well, even more so,— is that a week before that two more of our wingmen had also shot down MIGs in the same area. So within about eight days space of time our squadron shot down four MIGs in the vicinity of Airbase.

Bowling: Did you lose any of your own?

Ensch: No, we didn't lose any aircraft at all. The— as a matter of fact, the last MIG of the Vietnam Conflict was shot down by another one of our squadron mates. And, we were later awarded the best fighter squadron award for the year in the Navy for our cruise that year.

Bowling: Which fighter squadron was that, Commander?

Ensch: VF-161, fighter squadron 161. As I said, the four MIGs were shot down within about a five-mile radius of one another. And it was right at kind of a small mountain peak, or a ridge line that runs down points at Airbase, and Commander Holloway, Commander of the Sixth Fleet, later sent us a congratulatory message and he said that from
now on that ridge would be known as -- our call sign for the squadron was Rock River, that was our tactical call sign--- and he said that from now on that ridge will be known as Rock River Ridge.

Do you know the Vietnamese name for that ridge?

No, I don't, not right off hand. I could find the coordinates for it but I don't know what it is off hand. It's just a small ridge. That was essentially one of my most exciting days in the Navy.

Your total kills was two, right?

We got two on that same day.

Could you say a little something about the capability of the opponent, the flyers?

Well, we thought that they were fairly aggressive, compared to what we had thought and what we had heard. The information we'd had about the North Vietnamese pilots. But these guys had come to fight. There was no doubt about it. That's why we feel that the 19s were really just decoys and had tried to lead us into the fight. And hoped that the MIG-17s, four to two could have whipped us.

(End of Tape 1, Side 1 -- begin Side 2)
INTERVIEW WITH LIEUTENANT COMMANDER JOHN C. ENSCH

Dated: 19 March 1974
Interviewer: R. A. Bowling
Transcriber: Sarah Salvante

1 Cassette, 2 sides

(Beginning Tape 1, Side 2)

Bowling: This is part 2 of a three-part interview with Lieutenant Commander John C. Ensch, United States Navy. This interview is being conducted at the Naval Air Station, Miramar, San Diego, California on 26 March 1974. The interviewer is Captain R. A. Bowling, United States Navy, Retired, graduate student at San Diego State University.

All right, Commander Ensch. If you would please, would you continue on from the other side.

Ensch: Well, we talked about the 23rd of May and my MIG kills. It was about three months later, when I was on another mission, I was shot down over North Vietnam. It was again the same type of mission that I was on before, a MIG CAP mission, protecting a strike group going into North Vietnam.

Our station was just south of the harbor of Hai Phong, about forty miles south of that, and about nineteen-twenty miles inland over a very populated rice-paddy area. We had just gotten on station, when we were taken under fire by several SAM batteries in the area. My pilot, Lieutenant Commander Mike Doyle, and I started maneuvering he started maneuvering the aircraft and I was calling out the location of the SAMs being fired at us. We were in the process of maneuvering against a SAM from one sector when one from another sector which we didn't see exploded over our aircraft. It was, to the best of my impression, it seemed like it went off right over the cockpit.

The reason I say that, too is that received several—quite a bit
of shrapnel throughout my body--upper arms and chest, groin area and upper legs. Plus one fragment partially severed the thumb on my left hand--left it dangling.

I immediately screamed out that we had been hit and called up front to Mike to see if he was okay. I got no response from him. I looked up into the front cockpit and Mike was not, didn't look like he was sitting up right in a normal position. So I assumed that he must have received much more blast than what I did.

And we were going about five hundred knots, starting down about three thousand feet. I realized that the airplane wasn't going to fly, so I initiated the command ejection. In the F-4 there is a system in which either the pilot or the backseater can eject the other one. I went to that mode and ejected one handed from my seat.

The next thing I remember was the explosion of my seat going out. I was hangin' in the shoot. I looked around and I didn't see Mike's shoot at the time. I found out later, since I've been, since I was returned that two shoots were sighted, so I know that we did get him out of the aircraft. But he never showed up any more, and never showed up at camp. He is still listed as an MIA.

But there I was, hangin' in the shoot. And I remember trying to reach for my radio, which I carried on my--I carried two survival radios, one on either side of my waist on a web belt in some holster type affairs. And as I reached for it with my right hand, I realized that my hand wasn't going where is was supposed to. And I looked down and realized and I saw that both elbows had been dislocated and pushed about half-way inside of each arm. So I had no use of my arms.
And my thumb was still bleeding pretty badly and dangling.

I didn't have much more time to do much else there, I was pretty close to the ground by this time, as we did eject at very low altitude and a high speed. I looked down and saw I was about ready to land in a rice-paddy, so I just tried to relax and land and not do any more damage to myself—a broken leg or anything.

I landed in a rice-paddy, and after I fought my head back above the water I lay my head up on a little embankment, little walkways that they have through the rice-paddies. And at that time was when I realized that I was being fired upon by rifles on the ground. People on the ground were shooting at me, and bullets were landing three or four feet from my head, making the water spurt up.

So I could do nothing but lay there. I had no use of my arms I was still in my chute, couldn't get out of it. So I just lay there and just prayed like Hell that they wouldn't shoot me because I couldn't stand up and give myself up.

But they stopped shooting after a few seconds and then I heard them coming up through the water after me. And when they finally got within sight of me they saw I was no threat, I guess.

They came up, and started stripping me of all my equipment. Cut my shoes off of me, cut my flight suit, harness of the things off of me, with very little regard for my wounds. They just kind of jerked, pulled and tugged on my arms. The first thing they went for was my wristwatch, which was on my left hand. I recall that the guy had to push my thumb out of the way in order to get to the clasp to get it off. But after that, they stripped me down to my shorts and a T-shirt, and threw me into a fish-net, put poles through it
and carried me over to a village about three or four hundred yards away. And stuck me inside a little hootch.

It was about six-thirty in the evening when I was shot down, so it wasn't but another hour and a half or so until dark. I was kept there until dark.

While I was there, a lady came by with a little sort-of first aid kit and she took out some gauze and wrapped my injured thumb into the palm of my hand, just tied it in place so it wouldn't be floppin' around. And that was about the extent of the medical attention I got for the next three days.

After dark, they picked me up and carried me down through some paths and out to a main road, oh, I'd say maybe a mile or a mile and a half away. There was a truck waiting there fore me and they threw me and--in this truck. And there were about three or four guards, three or four guards in this truck. It was a pickup type truck with a canvas over the back and they started driving and they took me to Hanoi.

What was your shoot-down date, Commander?

It was the 25th of August, 1972.

On the way into---I ended up at the, what we call the Hanoi Hilton, P.O.W. Prison, in Hanoi. We made two stops on the way, from the time they picked me up from the village until I got into the Hanoi Hilton.

The first stop was after about an hour's drive, I guess. And I was blindfolded and made to lie down in the back of this truck and was covered up with a piece of tarpaulin or something. I remember all the--I was trying to keep my mind alert enough to make notes of
things that were goin' on around meant this time. I remember hearing an awful lot of truck traffic on the roads going the opposite direction, so--going south. Since I was going north towards Hanoi. So there was a lot of truck traffic, I remember that.

The first stop, they took me out of the truck, set me in a small room in a town that was not a little village, but a town. I had, you know, buildings of several stories. They took me into this one building, set me down in a room about the size of this one here--about twelve by fourteen. There was a desk in there and I was made to sit on a small stool in front of the desk.

A Vietnamese in a white shirt came in and sat down behind the desk and a photographer came in and started snapping pictures of me sitting on the stool in my shorts and the shirt. And I just turned my head away from him as he was trying to take pictures. Not tryin' to be belligerent, but just tryin' to be uncooperative in a passive way.

Then the guy behind the desk who spoke English told me that he wanted to know my name, where I was from. A lot of the questions I told him I couldn't answer because I was only allowed to give him four things--name, rank, service number, date of birth. And then he began berating me for being a war criminal and everything. And the thing I really remember about it was that he told me that Miss Jane Fonda had just been in his town and not too long ago. And she'd seen the true story and what had been done and, I guess, partly trying to impress me with the fact that Miss Fonda was more or less in sympathy with their cause. He didn't really try to persuade me
or sway me, I think. My impression was that it was just a way for them to brag a little bit, you know, that Miss Fonda had been here and she was one, she was an American, and was on their side, I guess.

How did that make you feel at the time?

Well, my condition was such that I was injured, and I'm sure I was in shock of some kind, but I thought it was pretty Goddam poor comment on the American, on her as an American, to give aid and comfort to the enemy, or country that we were in a conflict with. It made me feel, you know, like, well, oh--I felt bad to think that a fellow American would do something like that. But I have no respect for Miss Fonda, whatsoever, so I don't want to get into a personality conflict here. Because in my estimation, I have a personality and Miss Fonda doesn't so that would be a conflict, I think.

I just think that she was completely wrong in being over there in the first place. She's a, I don't think she knows what the Hell's going on the first place and, even if we were--even if she didn't agree with the war, I think she should say it over here in this country and not in the country in which were in combat with. She was kind of demoralizing to a lot of the POWs.

She and Mr. Ramsay Clarke who I was even more disappointed with to think that a man who had held such a high position in our government would go over there and aid and--give aid and comfort to the enemy as I call it. And be brainwashed by them, practically and--into making some of the statements and--. I just, I think it's inappropriate for any American citizen to go into a country like that.

We had Tokyo Rose and some of these in the Second World War
who were later jailed or executed for the very same thing. In the Vietnam War, they're practically national heroes. I think it's a poor comment on the American society today.

Just one thing, Commander, if you would. This terms you used, aid and comfort to the enemy, could you give some specific examples, please?

Well, I say "aid and comfort to the enemy" in the fact that I think that they aided the enemy in prolonging the war and they gave the enemy, I think, because of their--of the Sloane Kaufman's and the Ramsay Clarke's and the Fonda's and all of them goin' over there--this constant stream of Americans over there, I feel gave the Vietnamese the idea that this is the way the American people felt. I think it prolonged the war, and I think that had they realized earlier exactly how strongly the American people felt, the majority of the American people, I mean, about the war and about getting the POWs back, I don't think the war would have lasted that long.

I think that those people that went over there aided the enemy in their propaganda cause and gave comfort to them in the fact that they thought that they were swaying the thinking here in the United States. Which it was that small handful of people over there givin' them all this propaganda which they used, I think against the POWs, in my case there and some of the other POWs, I can't speak from personal experience, but were constantly told about people coming through there--some of them forced to meet these peace groups against their will.
Bowling: Did you ever meet any of them?

Ensch: No. I never did. And I'm quite proud of that, because I'm---

Bowling: Were you ever pressured to meet with them?

Ensch: No, not during the time that I was there, I was never pressured to.

For one thing, I don't think I ever would have been because of my injury. I don't think that they would have wanted me to meet the people because I was--- They put forth only the best looking and most health POWs to meet these types of groups. They didn't want to have a man whose thumb they had chopped off meet one of these groups.

I might get into that a little later, here. Exactly how they operated on me.

Bowling: Yes, let's get back into that, and then we can come back to the other point of it, Commander.

Ensch: All right.

Well, after this stop we made another stop which was at the river, waiting for a ferry to take us across to Hanoi. I ended up at the Hanoi Hilton late that night or early the next morning, anyway at dark.

I was put into a room about twelve feet square and was just layin' on the floor there. And that started the three days of interrogation, around-the-clock interrogation. Again I received no medical attention, my arms were starting to turn black from lack of circulation, my thumb was, again, just wrapped up into the palm of my hand.
Ensch: And they interrogated me, asking me past the name, rank, and serial number business. They wanted to know strike forces, they wanted to know military information about the ship, the air wing I was from, about the airplanes, what type of missions we flew, what altitude, what airspeeds, names of commanding officers of various squadrons, just all kinds of military information that's completely against the Geneva Convention.

And I informed them that I couldn't tell them, that I was bound by the Code of Conduct and the Geneva Convention to give only the "big four". They informed me that unless I wanted medical attention, I would have to start answering questions. They said that I was not cooperating, that I had a bad attitude, and that they would not give me medical attention until I answered the questions.

So this went on for three days, and, as I said, they started telling me, "You know, you are dying, you are just laying there dying. And as long as you refuse to answer our questions, we can't do anything about it.". So after about three days of this, I guess I was, at least I started really believing that I was dying. And then I had this conflict in my own mind as to what I should do.

Was it doing any good to just lay there and die? Or would it be better to try to make up a story in half-truths and lies and whatever, and see if I could get some medical attention. So I decided to go the route that I would--some of this information they already knew. They had caught me and they asked me what ship
Ensch: I was from. I told them that I didn't know or that I was from a ship that had already departed the area or something. They came right back and told me what ship I was from, so they already knew that.

So I realized that they knew more than what I was giving them credit for. So I decided that I'd go ahead and answer questions since it was three days since I had been—I had no more information about current strikes coming in. I could do no more harm to my fellow aviators I didn't figure.

Bowling: I think it might be six days, now, wasn't it?

Ensch: No, this was—no, three days. I arrived up in Hanoi the same night I was shot down and that I lay for three and a half days after that.

I started answering questions with the idea behind it that I'd make up a story that I could easily remember, in case I was ever questioned again. And I could readily recall these things so they wouldn't get caught me in a lie. I gave them information that I figured that they could get out of any Aviation News Week of Time Magazine or Stars and Stripes and they have all those publications up there. So I decided that the best thing to do is construct a story and see what happens.

So I started giving them for names of people that I gave them names of people from my past who I knew would never appear there. But yet, were familiar enough to me that I could recall them at a moment's notice. So I stuck these names into the squadron skipper's names that they asked for and the other things I answered.
like I said, just what I figured that they could already have, they already knew or they could easily get from an unclassified publication.

And it seemed to satisfy them, so that night, the third night, they came in well after dark. I guess it must have been nine, ten, eleven o'clock, something like that. Took me out, put me in a truck again, covered me up, drove me to a small hospital there in Hanoi. And took me into this room and strapped me down to a table, held my arm and my shoulders and head. Strapped me across the feet, thighs and the upper body, chest with leather straps to the table. And then held my arms and they started cutting on my thumb.

And I, of course, screamed in pain, and I said, "Please, please, give me some anesthetics, some kind. Put me to sleep, or do something." And the response was that no, no, there's no need for that because you have not fully cooperated with us. And besides, you have cause suffering in our country, and now it is time for you to experience suffering. That is just as well as I can remember just about what they told me. In so many words, that was what it was.

So they proceeded to cut my thumb off without anesthetic. And it was an experience that I probably will never forget. After that, they wrapped it up, set me up on the table and then set my elbows, again without anesthetic--just holding me in place and pulling them back in. They put them in some kind of wire cast, both elbows. Put me back in the truck and took me back to the Hanoi Hilton.
Back into the same room, and I laid there for another two or three days until again at night, they took me out and put me into a small bamboo hut in the middle of a large courtyard, which turned out to be what we call Camp Unity. It's where the other POWs in the camp were being held. I was kept there in solitary for twenty-three days and then I was put in with the other prisoners.

Did you get in with the other prisoners, then, at that time?

After the twenty-three days of solitary during which time I made contact with them. I poked a few holes in the bamboo matting and made contact with some of the prisoners that were in the other little courtyards and other cells. And we were caught communicating at one point. It was immediately after that that I was put in with the others.

How were you communicating?

Well, we communicated with sign language and—mostly sign language because I was separated from the rest of them by such a distance that I couldn't really use the tap code or anything. Also, there were some Vietnamese and Tai prisoners that were in the camp with us and they more or less were used as slaves—worked around the camp and cleaned it up and swept it. And they made contact with me, voice contact, and I was able to get a note, a written note, out to some of the others, senior officers in the camp, through these Tai prisoners. So those were the methods I communicated, got my name out to the other POWs.
Bowling: On this tap code, Commander. Is that the regular Morse Code?
Ensch: No, it's a---you set up a grid, one, two, three, four, five, one, two, three, four, five and then it'd be a, b, c, d, e--you go across like that. So a tap of [taps once][taps again]one, one would be "a"; one [taps once], two [taps twice] would be "b" and it's continued on like that. It's a series where the first tap indicates a column vertically, and the second tap indicates a column horizontally and you just know what that is. You kind of memorize it. The guys that used it for years and years, they got quite proficient with it, could carry on quite a conversation with that thing.

The other one is the flash code which is a variation of the deaf and dumb hand--- you spell each letter out, you know, a,b,c,d,each position of the hand indicates a certain letter and you just spell out each word as you go. That was our flash code.

Bowling: You look like you go pretty fast at it.
Ensch: Well, not as well as some of them did. They, some guys could talk almost as fast as I'm conversing now.

During that twenty-three days they pulled me out several times and tried to get me to sign statements and write letters to the President and letters to Congressmen or Senators condemning the war and saying I was against the war and this type thing. And I steadfastly refused and luckily they didn't put any more pressure on me. I say luckily because I certainly didn't want to go, to undergo any more torture that what I already had, but, luckily
Ensch: at the time I was shot down, the heavy torture and everything was a thing of the past.

Bowling: You had information that there had been a good bit of torture in the past?

Ensch: Yes, oh yes. To the point where they actually killed men under torture. Some of the POWs that were there, the old timers, some of their roommates didn't come back because they were actually tortured to death.

I know Miss Fonda wouldn't agree with that point, but I can tell you for a fact that it happened. And I know from a first-hand, I can tell you as I just did, how they quote 'operated' on me and the type of treatment they gave me in 1972.

Bowling: For possible cross-reference, could you give for the record the names of any POWs whom you thought were or you just heard, hearsay is good enough for reference who might have been tortured to death and if so, names of anybody who are still alive who might have first-hand information of that torture?

Ensch: Well, one of them was Ed Addebury. He was involved in an escape attempt with Colonel John and he never showed up again. Another one was Earl Cobbell.

Bowling: Was he recaptured? Or was he killed?

Ensch: Yes, both of them were recaptured, brought back into the camp and severely beaten and Addebury never showed up again. Colonel was returned with us and I'm sure he would have MORE about that than I do.
Ensch: Another one that I heard about was an Earl Cobbell, who I was told, was beaten to death.

Bowling: Was he Navy, Air Force...

Ensch: I don't recall, right off hand now. But most any of the POWs, and I don't mean old now, but the ones that were kept there for a longer period of time would have much more information on this story than what I have here. John Atteberry could probably tell you more about Ed Addribury than anybody since they were together.

[End of Tape 1, side 2]