



Air Force Colonel (Ret.) Fred Vann Cherry, Sr. Spent Seven Years as a Prison-of-War during the Vietnam War

Retired Air Force Colonel Cherry, who lived in Silver Spring, was on a combat mission on Oct. 22, 1965, when his F-105 Thunderchief fighter-bomber was shot down over North Vietnam. Cherry ejected and was subsequently captured, becoming the first and highest ranking black officer to become a prisoner of war in Vietnam. Subjected to harsh interrogation and repeated torture, he spent more than seven years as a prisoner of war in Hanoi until his release on Feb. 12, 1973.

Cherry was born in Suffolk, Virginia, on March 24, 1928. His parents were farmers. He attended racially segregated public schools and graduated in 1951 from Virginia Union University, a historically black college in Richmond. He then joined the Air Force and, during the Korean War, flew more than 50 combat missions over North Korea.

Upon his release as a prison of war and after returning home Cherry attended the National War College and the Defense Intelligence School in Washington. He retired from the Air Force in 1981 as a joint staff officer assigned to the Defense Intelligence Agency.

Cherry was awarded the Air Force Cross, the Silver Star, the Legion of Merit, two Distinguished Flying Crosses, two Bronze Stars, two Purple Hearts, the Meritorious Service Medal and the Outstanding Service to the Military Community award from the Tuskegee Airmen.

Cherry's life is the subject of the book, *Two Souls Indivisible: The Friendship That Saved Two POWs in Vietnam*, by James S. Hirsch. Cherry and Porter Halyburton first met with in their shared cell in a brutal POW camp in Vietnam. Cherry was badly injured by the North Vietnamese. Halyburton, a young navy flier, was a naïve white southerner thrown in as Cherry's cellmate. Their captors hoped close quarters would inflame American-bred racial tensions and break both men. Instead, Cherry was nursed back to health, a friendship grew strong. The intense connection. powerfully reported by James S. Hirsch, would sustain both men through the war and throughout their lives.

Cherry passed away at the age of 87 on February 16th, 2016 at a hospital in Washington.