

◆ A TRUE STORY ◆



TAP  
CODE

THE EPIC SURVIVAL TALE  
OF A VIETNAM POW  
AND THE SECRET CODE THAT  
CHANGED EVERYTHING

**COL. CARLYLE "SMITTY" HARRIS (RET.)**

AND SARA W. BERRY

The values of God, family, and country are a reflection of Col. Smitty Harris and what he represents. A true inspiration for all ages.

**BRIGADIER GENERAL JOHN M. RHODES,**  
U.S. Army National Guard

The incomprehensibly long ordeal of the Harris family is agonizing. Their love, faith, loyalty, and courage epitomize all that is good about America.

**LT. COL. ORSON SWINDLE, USMC (ret.), POW,**  
Hanoi, 11/11/1966 to 3/4/1973

*Tap Code* is an incredible story about two American heroes. Col. “Smitty” Harris and his wife, Louise, epitomize the definition of *commitment*—to God, to country, and to family. This tale of extreme perseverance will restore your faith in the human spirit.

**BRIGADIER GENERAL JOHN NICHOLS, USAF**

*Tap Code* is a hard road of reminiscence for those of us who were there, but an excellent history for those who have never known the terrors of war behind the lines of the enemy. The prison camps of North Vietnam were hell on earth, and those who know little about the POWs held captive will do well to read this book.

**SAM JOHNSON,** former U.S. representative  
from Texas, Colonel USAF (ret.),  
and ex-“Alcatraz” POW

“Smitty” Harris is one of the truest examples of our Air Force core values—integrity, service before self, excellence. As a pilot, I can attest to how Smitty’s Tap Code is an integral piece of our training today as we cultivate bold, innovative leaders who will continue the Long Blue Line and be ready, lethal pilots in the world’s greatest Air Force.

**COLONEL SAMANTHA WEEKS,** Commander,  
14th Flying Training Wing, Columbus  
Air Force Base, Mississippi

Col. “Smitty” Harris proudly served our great nation during the Vietnam War, and it is an honor to call him a trusted friend. He is known for his unwavering faith and loyalty to America.

**TRENT KELLY**, U.S. representative from Mississippi

*Tap Code* tells the true story of Col. Carlyle “Smitty” Harris, who was shot down in North Vietnam on April 4, 1965. From the first sentence you find yourself thrust from his fighter jet and into the hands of people who want to kill the young pilot. Smitty has the reader living his stay in the Hanoi Hilton, surviving brutal interrogations, and celebrating his homecoming. This is a remarkable story of the unbreakable American spirit forged by combat, capture, and faith.

**PHIL BRYANT**, governor of Mississippi

If you’re interested in what it was like to be a POW of the North Vietnamese, or to be the wife of one, grab a copy of *Tap Code* immediately. No one has told this story better.

**GENERAL CHUCK BOYD**, USAF (ret.)

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*Tap Code*

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*To all prisoners of war  
who endured untold hardship,  
this is for you.  
To all the families of these POWs  
who endured untold heartache,  
this is for you.  
To all captives everywhere,  
whether captives in body or in soul,  
this is for you.*

*May the words you find here  
fill you with enduring hope, strength, and peace.  
May you, with unveiled faces,  
see the glory of the One  
who came to set the captives free.*

“This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘Write in a book all the words I have spoken to you. The days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will bring my people Israel and Judah back from captivity and restore them to the land I gave their ancestors to possess,’ says the LORD.”

**JEREMIAH 30:2-3**

# FOREWORD

You are about to venture into a story so amazing that it's difficult to imagine. As one who has known Smitty and Louise Harris for almost fifty years, I can tell you that it's true and they are the real deal. These two are bright, wise, adventurous, and highly successful at everything they do. At the same time, they are highly regarded by others for their kindness and strong faith. They are also down-to-earth, fun-loving, and delightful to be around. They are unique—a married couple where both are superstars and both are elegantly humble.

On April 4, 1965, Smitty was the sixth American POW captured in the air war over North Vietnam. By the time I arrived two-and-a-half years later, he had already survived some of the worst treatment of the entire POW experience. Though a quiet captain and not the senior leader in the camp, Smitty had a monumental impact on the POW experience.

When writing and speaking about life as a POW, I refer to Smitty as the code bearer. As a young man spurred by his insatiable curiosity, Smitty learned a communication technique that we later called “the Tap Code.” What seemed like happenstance at the time now seems like a divine intervention to equip Smitty, one of the early arrivals in the camps, with a tool we all would desperately need in the days ahead.

In that medieval bastille known as the Hanoi Hilton, our captors' goal was to divide and conquer the POWs. The prison's sixteen-inch masonry walls were designed to isolate prisoners. Smitty took great risk and through resourcefulness and creativity spread the code that enabled our covert communication. Using the code, we could softly tap messages

of encouragement to lonely neighbors and pass along resistance policies from our leaders. These vital communications lifted our spirits and gave us a united front throughout the camps. Admiral Stockdale (senior Navy POW) has commented that communications were the blood and sinew that kept us alive. Smitty was the code bearer who enabled us to connect and communicate—the two most vital needs of every POW.

Smitty and I were in the same camp for more than five years and cellmates for almost two years. Since he was the most experienced POW in our group, we looked to him for wisdom and sought his counsel on tactics for our resistance and survival.

Back in “the land of the free,” as we called it, Louise was proving to be a true warrior as well. As one of the first MIA wives of the war, she suffered the learning curve. The Air Force had virtually no policies in place to deal with her situation. Louise’s initiative solved problems for her and their three young children and paved a smoother path for spouses of future POWs.

Eventually the war ended, and we came home. For Smitty and Louise, it had been just two months shy of eight years. Most of us had a wonderful reunion and moved on. It seemed that the Harris family just stayed in the reunion mode—relishing their time together again. They are one of the closest families I’ve ever known. Smitty and Louise continue to be as amazing as ever. Though they are among the most senior of the Traditionalist Generation, they are always a charming couple, blending smoothly with the four generations that cycle through their home and social lives.

As you read this inspiring story, you will see that the strong adjectives I used above to describe Smitty and Louise fall short. Their life story may seem beyond imagination, but I know them well and have seen it firsthand—it’s real. Moreover, the way they have bounced back from suffering and sacrifice can be an inspiration to today’s weak culture. Their lessons of character, courage, and commitment could rescue and restore our nation. I’m inspired by their example, and I believe you will be as well. They are my role models, and I hope you will let them be yours too.

*Col. Lee Ellis (ret.), former POW*

## CARLYLE SMITH “SMITTY” HARRIS

**APRIL 4, 1965**  
**11:00 A.M.**

In one split second, I passed from the known to the unknown—from a comfortable, safe, and ordered life into a hostile environment filled with danger and trauma.

When I ejected from my crippled airplane, I had no thoughts of what lay ahead. I was too busy trying to survive the crash. It was a spontaneous act of desperation, conditioned by years of emergency training, that would give me some chance for survival.

I had trained for this. I knew exactly what to do and what would happen. My seat would fly off with great velocity and force, just after the glass canopy of the plane flew hundreds of feet up in the air. My mind and my emotions were on autopilot as I went through the motions.

In my frantic efforts to keep my F-105 flying, I had waited until the last moment to radio my squadron mates that I was ejecting. As a result, my left hand was still on the mike button when I pulled the trigger that would catapult me from my burning and lifeless craft. As my parachute snapped open, I felt a sharp, searing pain in my left shoulder. I had not placed my arm in the armrest that would prevent it from flailing in the wind blast when my body was hurled into space. For a moment I thought I was blinded, but I reached up to my face and found that my oxygen mask had slipped up over my eyes. Pulling it down, I saw my F-105 as it struck the ground and burst into a huge ball of fire.

Looking up, my parachute was beautiful. There was absolute silence and serenity as I floated noiselessly earthward. What a contrast from the screaming, frantic scene moments before.

Suddenly, my mind raced to my predicament. I must have been briefly mesmerized or possibly in shock. A Vietnamese village was directly below me, and I could see people running around. It finally sank in—I was in enemy country and would probably be there a long time.

There were no trees or other cover in the area—just open rice paddies and the village. My chances for evasion were nil. I reached up and grabbed my parachute risers with my right hand and was successful in slipping my chute sideways so I would float away from the village. I landed less than 100 yards from the thatched-roof huts and immediately tried to open my survival kit to get my emergency radio so I could alert my friends that I was safely on the ground. My left arm was limp and useless, which made it very difficult to open the emergency kit. Before I could get to the radio, loud, angry voices were yelling at me.

Villagers had already surrounded me and were closing in. I saw a few rifles, but most had sticks and hoes. Many of the men seemed almost as frightened of me as I was of them. As I looked around, the men in my line of sight would duck down behind a small levee or clump of grass as if I could harm them with my stare. However, the circle of men tightened, and a few brave ones finally rushed me and knocked me to the ground. I was armed with a snub-nosed .38 revolver strapped to my chest, but it had not even occurred to me to try to fight my way out of these impossible odds, so the gun was still in its holster.

The villagers quickly began to strip me of all my gear. However, the process was as frustrating for them as for me because they had trouble with all the snaps and zippers on my flight gear. While several men held my upper torso on the ground, two men tried to pull my flight suit over my heavy high-top boots, but that didn't work, so they began to remove the boots. A heavy zipper ran down each boot for quick donning, but the Vietnamese ignored the zippers and laboriously unlaced each boot down to the toe before pulling it off. Finally, I was clothed only in my shorts and was yanked to my feet and pushed toward the village. I heard several angry voices, and one irate young man pushed me off the narrow levee into ankle-deep water. He raised his gun to shoot me on the spot, but an older man grabbed the barrel of his rifle, and I was pulled back onto the levee.

As we proceeded toward the village, a violent argument broke out among the men. Several, armed with rifles, seemed to gain control of the mob. On the edge of the village was a partial brick wall, and three men pushed me with my back against it. One was the man who had pushed me off the levee. He put his forefinger to my forehead and jabbered instructions to his cohorts. The crowd, now including some women and children, moved back to leave about a fifteen-foot clear area in front of me.

Three men positioned themselves with rifles directly in front of me, and their leader backed away to join them. I knew I was about to be killed, but somehow my mind refused to accept the seriousness of the situation. I kept thinking, *Stand tall and straight; I must stand tall and straight.* Despite being stripped and bruised and broken, my body stood tall and straight, with a soldier's back, and my thoughts turned to the source of my strength—prayer: *Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.*

I was unable to finish my prayer due to the distraction of angry voices, livid faces, and the electric excitement of the mob scene. It was almost as if I were watching a movie from afar. I wanted only to keep my composure and at least die bravely, as all movie heroes are supposed to do. As the pitch of excitement of the mob increased, there were more angry voices, and some men milled into the circle, arguing violently with my executioners. Other men came over to me and started leading me away from the wall. I shivered violently. Was what had just occurred a bad dream or was it real? It was only later that the full impact of what had almost happened sank into my muddled brain. I still shudder when I recall those moments that are engraved indelibly in my mind.

## LOUISE LAMBERT HARRIS

# 2

**APRIL 5, 1965**

**5:00 A.M.**

I lay alone in our double bed, sleeping soundly. It had taken me a while to get used to sleeping alone, but after many nights, weeks, and months of separation throughout our five years of marriage, I had overcome the anxious agitation that had once plagued me. I no longer jumped at every creak or awakened at every bark from our beloved German Shepherd, Schotze. No, I had grown accustomed to the life of an Air Force wife. I knew what I had signed up for. And I was sure that this indeed was the life I had chosen—the life I wanted. God had blessed me indeed.

I had not always possessed this assurance—this deep-rooted certainty that I had chosen well my path of life. Though my love for Carlyle Smith Harris had grown into deep wells of love in a relatively short amount of time, I had insisted on a full six months of engagement. It took me years to tell Smitty why I had insisted on this time frame. With his scheduled assignments, a quicker engagement would have been more convenient. But I needed to be absolutely certain. And as the months melted one into another, our hearts melted into one as well, and my resolve—my determination that this would be the best life, the best path, for me as well as for Smitty—came to live in my heart.

My time of testing quickly came, even before we had the opportunity to say, “I do.” If Smitty ever doubted that I would be an understanding wife, his fears were dispelled when one month before our wedding, he announced it would have to be delayed for an additional month. By now I was as anxious as Smitty was to be married, and I

regretted the six-month engagement. Just as I began counting down the days to our blessed event, Smitty was asked if he would take a six-week trip to make demonstration flights all over the Pacific area in the T-37 jet trainer. He was to fly in Hawaii, Tokyo, Korea, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Australia. Between demonstration flights, he and his crew would dismantle the wing of the T-37, and they would be transported in a C-130 transport aircraft.

I knew the trip would be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for Smitty. I also knew this would be a test of my resolve to be a supportive and faithful Air Force wife, so I joyfully acquiesced in delaying our wedding. I say joyfully because even at a young age I had learned the difference between happiness and joy. Happiness is dependent on our circumstances, whereas joy is another thing entirely. Joy involves looking at the whole situation and seeing the benefits for others as well as for ourselves. Joy is not dependent on our circumstances and is not removed through our situations. Joy is a gift, and joy is a choice. I quickly learned to choose this eternal gift of joy, and this mind-set would prove to be tested far beyond what I could have fathomed.

The delay of our wedding, of course, did not make me happy. It did, however, make me joyful that Smitty had been granted the opportunity, so I chose to joyfully support him. As it turned out, the whole trip was canceled, and our wedding occurred as scheduled.

But I had passed the test. My resolve—my surety in this life I had chosen—was set in stone, and all of life’s chiseling would never change this commitment.



In the wee hours of the early morning of April 5, 1965, I slept soundly—that is, until the dream. Oh, it was so clear, so vivid. I heard the beloved voice of my Smitty calling my name. *Louise, Louise!* I sat straight up in bed. *Smitty?* I replied, half to myself, half to the voice I had heard. *Why, it can't be Smitty. He's in Korat, Thailand. He'll be there for at least four more days,* I thought. Still, the voice had been so clear.

I quickly rose and put on my bathrobe and slippers. I tied the

bathrobe as tightly as I could around my almost-eight-months-pregnant body and walked quickly down the hallway. The sound of flapping slippers seemed too loud against the hardwood floor, and I slowed a bit to keep from waking the girls. I didn't have to wake Schotze, who already stood as if at attention when I entered the kitchen. I took the leash off the hook by the back door and went out into the dark, cool night. I walked all around the house, feeling silly, knowing it couldn't have been Smitty. Even so, I had to check. The voice—his voice—had been so real. Not surprisingly, our walk around the house did not produce a reunion with my Smitty. I replaced the leash by the door and watched as Schotze lay contentedly back down on his bed on the floor.

I, however, did not lie down as contentedly. As I tried to shake off the dream and fall back to sleep, my mind kept traveling backward through my years with Smitty. I smiled as I remembered.



Carlyle Smith Harris had thoroughly enjoyed being a bachelor officer in the Air Force. He had particularly enjoyed the training flights he took all over the United States with students when he was an instructor pilot and in flights of fighters when in an operational unit. Las Vegas, Miami, San Francisco, New York, and other exciting places were easily within reach of his cross-country flights.

Marriage was simply out of the question for Smitty. He thought it would put a damper on his restless spirit. He persistently avoided any long-term commitments, while actively enjoying meeting and dating girls at every opportunity.

But as almost inevitably happens, he soon became very interested in a girl who showed little interest in him. I had dated a friend of Smitty's who was about to enter pilot training. He introduced me to Smitty. Soon, instead of trying to avoid any amorous entanglement with the opposite sex, Smitty was actively seeking ways to win my heart and my love.

The early years of our marriage had been idyllic. Robin and Carolyn,

our two precious daughters, were three and four years old when Smitty received orders in 1964 to transfer from McConnell Air Force Base in Kansas to Kadena Air Base in Okinawa, where he would fly the F-105 fighter-bomber. We had been happy here for more than a year now.

When Smitty received the assignment, we were all excited and hoped for an opportunity to visit Japan, Hong Kong, and the Philippines while we were there on our two-to-three-year tour. Smitty had been a flight commander in the F-105 at McConnell and thoroughly enjoyed this high-performance aircraft, which he had been selected to fly in international skies. But not everyone was as excited as the two of us were. While we visited my family prior to departure, my mother had expressed fear that Smitty would become involved in the war in Vietnam. Smitty had assured her—and me—that the F-105 was much too large and fast to be successfully used in the close air support role that would be required in the war in South Vietnam. At that time, the air war had barely begun over North Vietnam, where the interdiction of supply routes and bombing of military targets could utilize the F-105's capabilities. We proceeded blissfully to our new assignment.

The girls and I arrived in late January 1965 after Smitty had been there long enough to buy a home on the island and get settled in his new job. Soon after we arrived, it became apparent that the air war might expand rapidly to North Vietnam. Everett Alvarez Jr., a Navy pilot, had been shot down and captured on August 5, 1964, during a reprisal bombing mission following the Tonkin Gulf incident. Thus, he became the first American POW held in North Vietnam.

In February, Bob Shumaker, another Navy pilot, was shot down and captured over Dong Hoi. In March, one of Smitty's first missions from Korat was a bombing mission in northern Laos near the Vietnam border. The target, an ammo dump, had been completely destroyed, but one Air Force F-105 pilot had been shot down and later rescued. Also in March, a squadron strength unit made up of men and aircraft from the three F-105 squadrons at Kadena was sent on temporary duty to Korat Air Base in Thailand. The obvious use for this detachment would be an expanded air war over North Vietnam.



Smitty never held back information from me. We were equal partners with different parts in the story of our life together. Even as I lay in the dark, my agitation was not fear. I knew he was a fighter pilot when I married him. This is what he chose to do. He loved it, believed in it, and was committed to it. And I was committed to him. With that thought, the familiar resolve returned, and peaceful sleep returned with it. It was the last peaceful sleep I would enjoy for quite some time.

**APRIL 4, 1965**

**11:45 A.M.**

In the village I was led into a dirt-floored building, and several people pushed in with me. An older man started giving instructions, and all left but two men with rifles and him. He was holding my .38 revolver.

Just to be safe, my hands, which had been tied behind my back, were now tied to a post that supported the roof. After about an hour, I saw a uniformed man pull up to the hut on a bicycle. After a short conversation among my captors, my hands were untied, and someone brought in my flight suit and boots. After donning them, I was taken out and motioned to start walking. The older man led the way, and the two men with rifles followed. Ten or twelve other villagers joined our group.

When we came to the edge of the village, we passed over a narrow levee with a deep trench dug beside it. The older man stopped and talked to the men behind me. I guess I was still shaken up by my previous experience with a firing squad, for I was sure that at any moment a bullet would crash into my head and I would be pushed into the trench. Instead, he turned around, and we started walking again. My injured shoulder was giving me much pain, so I pulled the zipper of my flight suit down to my waist and rested my arm in it like a sling. Also, my knee had gotten stiff and sore while I was sitting in the hut. It turned out to be a bad sprain, but I hadn't even known it was hurt until then.

We walked for about an hour on small paths and levees between the rice paddies until we reached another larger village. The people were out in force to see me. I was surprised to see almost no hostility

# *Tap Code*

## **The Epic Survival Tale of a Vietnam POW and the Secret Code That Changed Everything**

By Col. Carlyle "Smitty" Harris (Ret.)

*Tap Code* shares never-before-told details of underground operations during the Vietnam War while weaving in an inspiring story of true love, honor, and courage as husband and wife endured the hardest circumstances they had ever faced.

Air Force pilot Captain Carlyle "Smitty" Harris was the sixth American POW captured in the air war over North Vietnam, and for the next eight years, Smitty and hundreds of other American POWs — including John McCain — suffered torture, solitary confinement, and abuse.

But in the midst of the struggle, Smitty remembered once learning the Tap Code — an old, long-unused World War II method of communication through tapping on a common water pipe. The Tap Code quickly spread throughout the prison and became a lifeline during their internment — a morale booster, a vehicle of unity, and a way to communicate the chain of command and continue their underground operations, which ultimately impacted the course of the war.

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