

# STUDIES IN INTELLIGENCE



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**John T. Downey**

**Richard G. Fecteau**

Shot down in 1952.

Boundary representation is not necessarily authoritative.

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## Extraordinary Fidelity Two CIA Prisoners in China, 1952-1973 (U)



*Extraordinary Fidelity***Two CIA Prisoners in China, 1952–1973 (U)***Nicholas Dujmovic*

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**Shot down on their  
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 ”

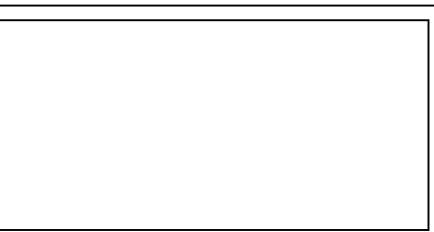
Beijing’s capture, imprisonment, and eventual release of CIA officers John T. Downey and Richard G. Fecteau is an amazing story that few CIA officers know about today. Shot down over Communist China on their first operational mission in 1952, these young men spent the next two decades imprisoned, often in solitary confinement, while their government officially denied they were CIA officers. Fecteau was released in 1971, Downey in 1973. They came home to an America vastly different from the country they had left, but both adjusted surprisingly well and have since lived full lives. (U)

Even though Downey and Fecteau were welcomed back as heroes by the CIA family more than 30 years ago and their story has been covered in open literature—albeit in short and generally flawed accounts—institutional memory regarding these brave officers has dimmed.<sup>1</sup> Their ordeal is not well known among today’s officers, judging by the surprise and wonder CIA historians encounter when relating it in internal lectures and training courses. The Downey-Fecteau case has never been treated in *Studies in Intelligence* and is almost wholly absent from classified histories.<sup>2</sup> Until now, most members of the Intelligence Community had no better information on the case than that available to the general public. (U)

This story is important as a part of US intelligence history because it demonstrates the risks of operations (and the consequences of operational error), the qualities of character necessary to endure hardship, and the potential damage to reputations through the persistence of false stories about past events. Above all, the saga of John Downey and Richard Fecteau is about remarkable faithfulness, shown not only by the men who were deprived of their freedom, but also by an Agency that never gave up hope. While it was through operational misjudgments that these two spent much of their adulthood in Chinese prisons, the Agency, at least in part, redeemed itself through its later care for the men from whom years had been stolen. (U)

<sup>1</sup> Downey’s and Fecteau’s CIA affiliation was revealed as early as 1957 by a disgruntled former USIA official, Charles Edmundson, and by early exposés of the Agency, such as David Wise and Thomas Ross, *The Invisible Government* (New York: Random House, 1964). Later brief treatments can be found in William Colby and Peter Forbath, *Honorable Men: My Life in the CIA* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), in which former Director of Central Intelligence Colby identifies Downey and Fecteau as “CIA agents”; John Ranelagh, *The Agency: The Rise and Decline of the CIA* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986); William Leary, *Perilous Missions: Civil Air Transport and CIA Covert Operations in Asia* (University of Alabama Press, 1984); Norman Polmar and Thomas Allen, *The Encyclopedia of Espionage* (New York: Gramercy, 1997); Ted Gup, *The Book of Honor* (New York: Doubleday, 2000); and James Lilly, *China Hands* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004). The public also can learn of the case at the International Spy Museum in Washington, DC, and through the Internet’s *Wikipedia*. (U)

Nicholas Dujmovic is a CIA historian. (U)



**The Operational Context (U)**

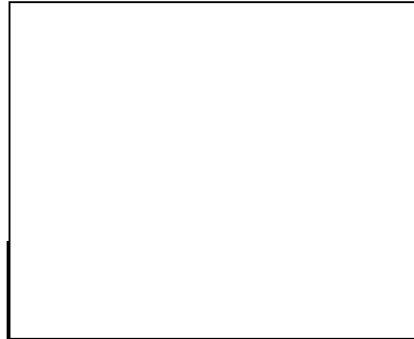
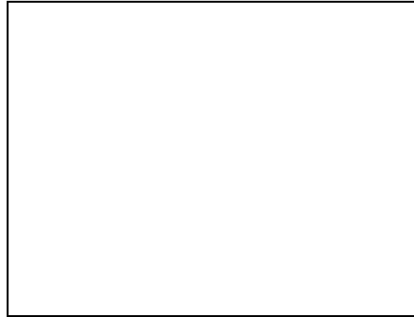
John Downey and Richard Fecteau were youthful CIA paramilitary officers: Downey, born in Connecticut, had entered the CIA in June 1951, after graduating from Yale; Fecteau, from Massachusetts, entered on duty a few months later, having graduated from Boston University. Both men had been varsity football players, and both were outgoing and engaging with noted senses of humor. They were stationed at [redacted] on their first overseas assignment, when the shoot-down occurred.<sup>3</sup> (U)

By late 1952, the Korean War had been going on for more than two years. Accounts often identify that war as the reason for the operation Downey and Fecteau were participating in. [redacted]

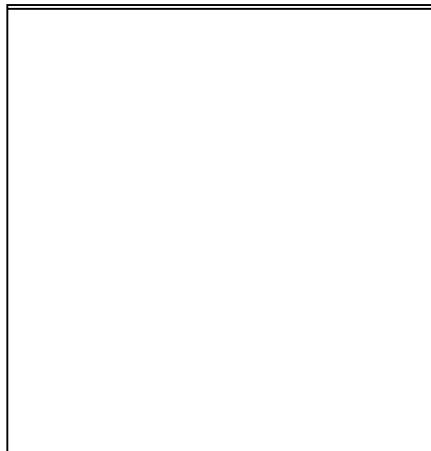
<sup>2</sup> The standard classified history of the CIA used in training— [redacted]

[redacted] only briefly touches the context of CIA [redacted] in the early 1950s. None of the official histories of the directors of central intelligence who served during Downey's and Fecteau's incarceration mentions them at all. [redacted]

<sup>3</sup> Official CIA personnel files for John T. Downey and Richard G. Fecteau. (Hereafter, Downey/Fecteau personnel files.) (U)



This was to be accomplished by small teams of CIA-trained ethnic Chinese agents, generally inserted through air-drops. Drawing from the OSS experience in Europe during World War II, the teams were to



link up with local guerrilla forces, collect intelligence and possibly engage in sabotage and psychological warfare, and report back by radio. [redacted]

By the time of Downey's and Fecteau's involvement, the record of [redacted] insertions by air was short, and not good. Because of resource constraints the training of Chinese agents at [redacted] was delayed, and the first team to be airdropped [redacted] did not deploy until April 1952. [redacted]

The second team (STAROMA) comprised five ethnic Chinese dropped into [redacted] Manchuria in mid-July 1952. Downey was well known to the STAROMA operatives because he had trained them. The team quickly established radio contact with [redacted] and was resupplied by air in August and October. A sixth STAROMA team member, intended as a courier between the team and [redacted] was dropped in September. In early November, the team reported contact with a local guerrilla leader and said it had obtained needed operational documents

<sup>5</sup> Bell, 130-40. Woodrow Kuhns, "CIA and China in the Time of Mao," unpublished CIA History Staff paper, Center for the Study of Intelligence. [redacted]

“  
The team was  
hurriedly trained in  
'air snatch'  
procedures.

”

such as [redacted] They requested air-exfiltration of the courier, [redacted]

At that time, the technique for aerial pickup involved flying an aircraft at low altitude and hooking a line elevated between two poles. The line was connected to a harness in which the agent was strapped. Once airborne, the man was to be winched into the aircraft. This technique required specialized training, both for the pilots of the aircraft, provided by [redacted]

[redacted] Civil Air Transport (CAT), and for the two men who would operate the winch. Pilots Norman Schwartz and Robert Snoddy had trained in the aerial pickup technique during the fall of 1952 and were willing to undertake the mission. On 20 November, [redacted] radioed back to STAROMA: "Will air snatch approximately 2400 hours" on 29 November.<sup>7</sup> [redacted]

The question of who would operate the winch, however, was still to be resolved. Originally, Chinese crewmen were to be used, but time was too short to fully train them. Instead, two CAT personnel trained in the procedure were identified for the pickup flight, but [redacted] pulled them four days before the mission because they lacked Top

[redacted]

Secret clearances. Downey, who had been at [redacted] for about a year, and Fecteau, who had arrived in the first week of November, were directed to fill

[redacted]

the aircraft pickup system in use in 1952 was not, as is sometimes asserted, the Skyhook system developed in the late 1950s by [redacted] but was rather a more rudimentary arrangement known as the "All American" system that the Army Air Force had modified during World War II from a system to pick up mail bags. [redacted]

the breach. They were flown to [redacted] and hurriedly trained in the procedure during the week of 24 November. [redacted]

Late on 29 November, Downey and Fecteau boarded Schwartz and Snoddy's olive drab C-47 and took off for the rendezvous point in Chinese Communist Manchuria, some 400 miles away. It was a quiet, uneventful flight of less than three hours. The moon was nearly full and visibility was excellent. At one point, Fecteau opened a survival kit and noted that the .32-caliber pistol therein had no ammunition—joking about that was the only conversation the men had on the flight.<sup>8</sup> [redacted]

[redacted]

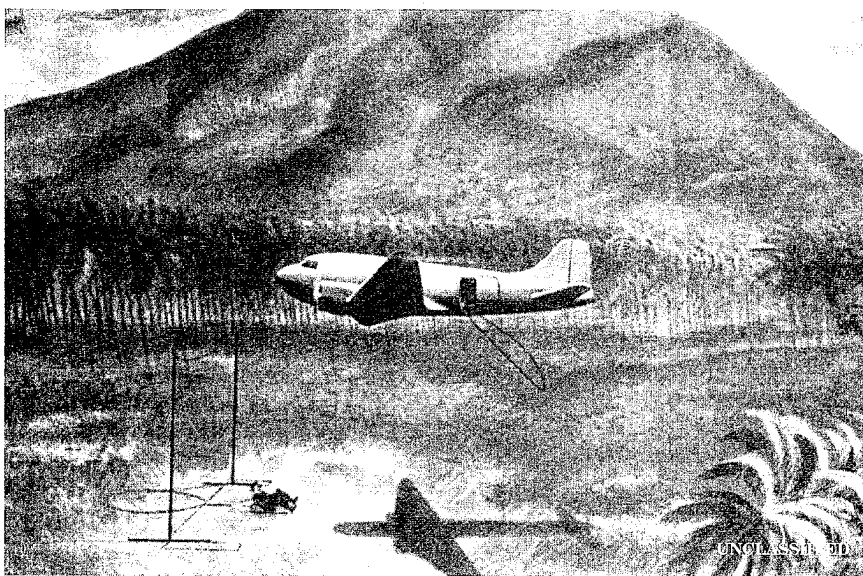
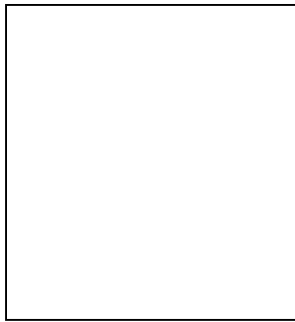
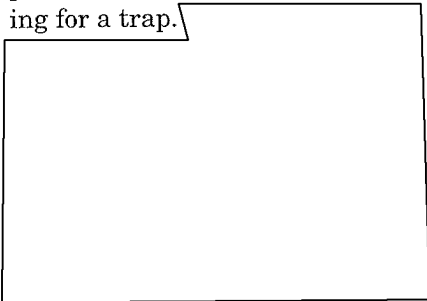


Illustration of snatch pickup, from 1944 US Army manual. (U)



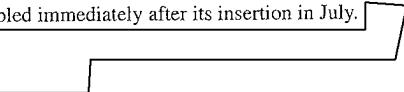
### Mission Gone Awry (U)

The C-47 aircraft, with its CAT pilots and CIA crew, was heading for a trap.



STAROMA members almost certainly had told Chinese authorities everything they knew about the operation, as well as the CIA men and facilities associated with it. From the way the ambush was conducted, it was clear that the Chinese Communists knew exactly what to expect when the C-47 arrived at the pickup point.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Far East Division later assessed that STAROMA probably had been caught and doubled immediately after its insertion in July.



~~SECRET~~

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Reaching the designated area around midnight, the aircraft received the proper recognition signal from the ground.<sup>11</sup> Downey and Fecteau pushed out supplies for the team—food and equipment needed for the aerial pickup. Then Schwartz and Snoddy flew the aircraft away from the area to allow the STAROMA team time to set up the poles and line for the “snatch.” Returning about 45 minutes later and receiving a ready signal, the C-47 flew a dry run by the pickup point, which served both to orient the pilots and to alert the man being exfiltrated that the next pass would be for him. Copilot Snoddy came back momentarily to the rear of the aircraft to make sure Downey and Fecteau were ready. On the moonlit landscape, four or five people could be seen on the ground. One man was in the pickup harness, facing the path of the aircraft.

As the C-47 came in low for the pickup, flying nearly at its stall

<sup>10</sup> [redacted] Fecteau’s reminiscences as told to Glenn KIRKIN, “My Nineteen Years in a Chinese Prison,” *Yankee Magazine*, November 1982; Richard Fecteau letter to Erik Kirzinger (pilot Schwartz’s nephew), 1 July 2003—copy in author’s possession.

<sup>11</sup> In debriefings 20 years later, Fecteau remembered the recognition signal as a flashlight signal; Downey thought it comprised three bonfires. Both were used.

speed of around 60 knots, white sheets that had been camouflaging two anti-aircraft guns on the snowy terrain flew off and gunfire erupted at the very moment the pickup was to have been made. The guns straddled the flight path, enabling a murderous crossfire. At this point, a crowd of men emerged from the woods.<sup>12</sup> Whether by reflex or purposefully, the pilots directed the aircraft’s nose up, preventing an immediate crash; however, the engines cut out and the aircraft glided to a controlled crash among some trees, breaking in two with the nose in the air. (U)

Downey and Fecteau had been secured to the aircraft with harnesses to keep them from falling out during the winching. On impact, both slid along the floor of the aircraft, cushioned somewhat by their heavy winter clothing. Fecteau’s harness broke, causing him to crash into the bulkhead separating the main body of the aircraft from the cockpit, which, he later said, gave him a bump on his head “you could hang your coat on.” (U)

<sup>12</sup> Beijing recently published a highly fanciful, heroically written version of events that night, which claims the Chinese awaited the CIA aircraft with 37 guns—half of them machine guns, the rest anti-aircraft cannon—along with 400 armed security forces, all of which fired at the plane! The account also asserts that Downey and Fecteau came out firing small arms before surrendering. See “The Wipe-Out of the American Spies in An Tu County,” in *Documentary On the Support to Resist the U.S. and Aid Korea*, (Beijing: China Literary History Publishing House, 2000)—translation acquired by Erik Kirzinger (pilot Schwartz’s nephew) and in this author’s possession. (U)

“  
‘We’re in a hell  
of a  
mess.’  
”

Other than suffering bruises and being shaken up, Downey and Fecteau were extremely fortunate in being unhurt. The Chinese apparently had targeted the cockpit, with gunfire passing through the floor in the forward part of the aircraft but stopping short of where Downey and Fecteau had been stationed, although one bullet singed Downey’s cheek. Meanwhile, tracer bullets had ignited the fuel. Both men tried to get to the cockpit to check on the pilots, who were not answering Downey’s shouts, but their part of the aircraft was burning fiercely and the two had to move away. Whether due to gunfire, the impact, or the fire, the pilots died at the scene.<sup>13</sup> Fecteau later remembered standing outside the aircraft with Downey, both stunned but conscious, telling each other that they were “in a hell of a mess.” The Chinese security forces descended on them, “whooping and hollering,” and they gave themselves up to the inevitable [redacted]

**Assessing Field Responsibility (U)**

Over the years, various explanations arose in CIA mythology to explain Downey’s and Fecteau’s participation in the ill-fated mission. It seemed incredible to oper-

<sup>13</sup> After years of negotiations, a US Defense Department excavation team was finally allowed into the area by the Chinese government in 2002, where they discovered fragments of the aircraft. In June 2004, the team found bone and tooth fragments, which later were identified as Robert Snoddy’s. To date, no remains of Schwartz have been identified. (U)

ations officers that two CIA employees, familiar with operations, locations, and personnel, would be sent on a mission that exposed them to possible capture by the enemy. One of the most persistent myths was that the two were joy-riding. In fact, the record shows that they were directed to be on the flight and that there were no regulations providing guidance to management in such matters. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

**Men without a Future (U)**

The Chinese security forces treated Downey and Fecteau roughly as they tied them up.

<sup>14</sup> Oral History interview of [redacted] March 2000, transcript in CIA History Staff archive. [redacted] confirmed his assertions to the author in a telephone conversation on 20 January 2006 and subsequent e-mails [redacted]

“

**The team was  
'presumed dead.' The  
DCI sent letters of  
condolence.**

”

The prisoners were taken to a building in a nearby village—possibly a police station in Antu, which was near the pickup point. There it became clear that the STAROMA team had talked: Across the room, Downey saw the courier they were to pick up looking at him and nodding to a Chinese security officer, a man of some authority with his leather jacket and pistol, who pointed at Downey and said, in English, “You are Jack.” Fecteau remembers being told, “Your future is very dark.” The man took their names. Fecteau gave his full name, Richard George Fecteau, to warn off potential rescuers if the Chinese sent out a false message from him and Downey. The two CIA officers, with a dozen armed guards, were then taken by truck and train to a prison in Mukden (Shenyang), the largest city in Manchuria, almost 300 miles away. In Mukden, they were shackled with heavy leg irons and isolated in separate cells.<sup>15</sup>

**Reaction at Home (U)**

Several hours after the scheduled time of pickup, [redacted] received a message from the STAROMA team, reporting that the snatch was successful. However, when the C-47 was overdue for its return on the morning of

30 November 1952, [redacted] notified CIA headquarters [redacted]

Meanwhile, the US military conducted an intensive search of accessible sea and land routes, with negative results. Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) Walter Bedell Smith signed letters of condolence to the men's families, saying “I have learned that [your son/your husband] was a passenger on a [redacted] plane flight between South Korea and Japan which is now overdue and that there is grave fear that he may have been lost.”<sup>16</sup>

By mid-December, the CIA had made the official determination that the men were missing in action; however, within the Far East Division, the strong feeling was that Downey and Fecteau, as

well as the pilots, were dead at the scene of the intended pickup. Another agent team visited the crash site in late December 1952 and found unidentifiable body parts in the forward part of the aircraft. [redacted]

With nothing other than the conviction that the Chinese Communists would have made propaganda use of the CIA men had either remained alive, the Agency declared Downey and Fecteau “presumed dead” on 4 December 1953. Letters to that effect were sent to the families under the signature of DCI Allen Dulles.<sup>17</sup>

**The Interrogations (U)**

Meanwhile, of course, the men were very much alive, a fact known only to their captors. Separated in Mukden, Downey and Fecteau would not see each other for two years. The interrogations began, with sessions usually lasting for four hours, but some as long as 24 hours straight. Sleep deprivation was part of the game: The men were prohibited from

<sup>15</sup> [redacted] DCI Smith letters to Mary Downey [John Downey's mother] and to Joanne Fecteau [Richard Fecteau's wife], 4 December 1952, copies in DCI records, [redacted]

<sup>15</sup> Fecteau [redacted]

[redacted] The date of the “presumed dead” finding was exactly a year and a day from the date [redacted] for loss of the plane. The presumptive finding of death in late 1953 was made by an ad hoc group chaired by future DDO [redacted]

“

**Isolated, in irons, and  
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”

sleeping during the day and the Chinese would invariably haul them off for middle-of-the-night interrogations after a half hour's sleep. An important element of the Chinese technique was to tell Downey and Fecteau that no one knew they were alive and that no one would ever know until the Chinese decided to announce the fact—if they ever decided to do so. At the same time, the men were told that the US government was evil and did not care about them and that they should forget their families. Downey later said, "I was extremely scared . . . . We were isolated and had no idea of what was going to happen to us and had no idea of what was going on in the world." [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

The men were never tortured physically or, after their initial capture, beaten. Fecteau reported that he wore leg irons constantly for the first 10 months and that he was made to stand during

[redacted]

interrogations to the point of falling down from exhaustion, especially after being caught lying or bluffing. Downey remembered the leg irons and the intense psychological pressure of interrogations,

[redacted]

Eventually both men—isolated from each other, battered psychologically, threatened with torture and execution—talked, albeit divulging varying degrees of truth.

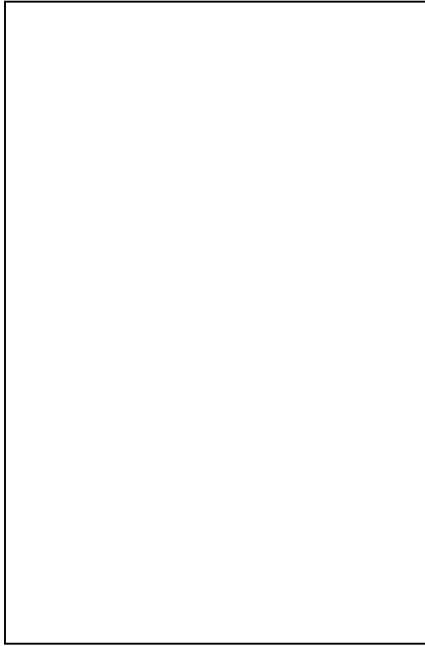
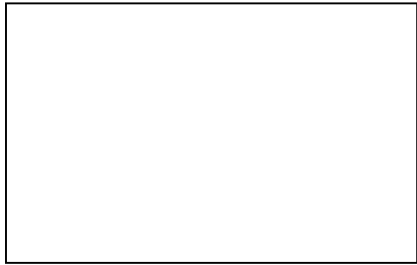
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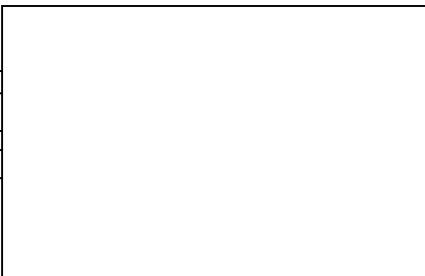
“  
**Anticipating  
execution, Downey  
considered  
his life sentence ‘a  
relief.’**  
”





After their first five months in Mukden, the men were moved to a prison in Beijing. They were still isolated and in irons, still undergoing interrogations, still each in a small cell illuminated by a single bulb, with a straw mattress. Fecteau remembers being told to sit on the floor and stare at a black dot on the wall and think about his crimes. For five months after the move to Beijing, he was not allowed a bath. His weight dropped by 70 pounds; Downey lost 30 pounds.<sup>20</sup> (U)

**Back From the Dead (U)**

Two years after their capture, the men saw each other for the first time since the shutdown. They were put on trial together in a secret military proceeding, the authorities apparently having been satisfied with the take from



<sup>20</sup> Cell sizes varied, from 5-by-8 feet to 12-by-15 feet. The men were moved often enough to disorient and anger them. 

the interrogations. Fecteau remembers being marched into the courtroom and told to stand by Downey, who looked despondent and who was dressed in a new prison suit. To cheer Downey as he stood next to him, Fecteau whispered, "Who's your tailor?" Downey smiled thinly. Such humor in the face of adversity was needed, for the military tribunal convicted Downey, the "Chief Culprit," and Fecteau, the "Assistant Chief Culprit," of espionage. Downey received life imprisonment; Fecteau, 20 years. Downey's immediate reaction was relief, as he had assumed he would be executed. Fecteau could not imagine even 10 years in prison, but he felt sorrier for Downey than for himself. When Fecteau remarked, "My wife is going to die childless," Downey broke into laughter, angering the guards. 

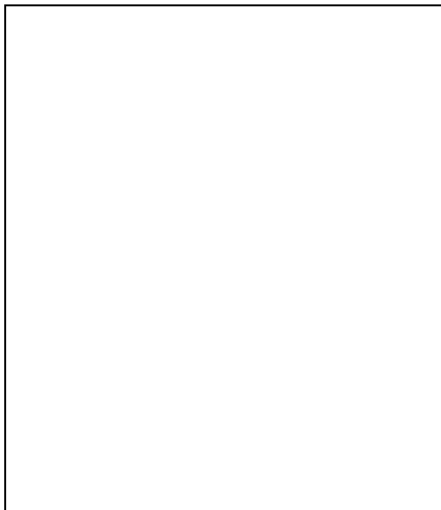
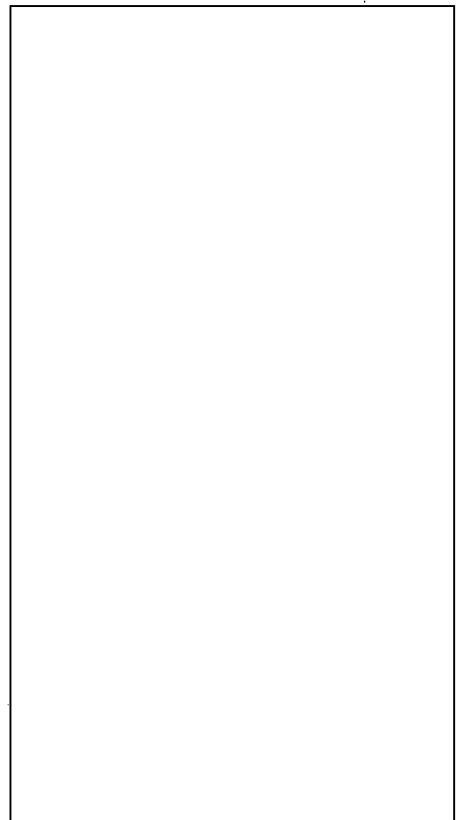
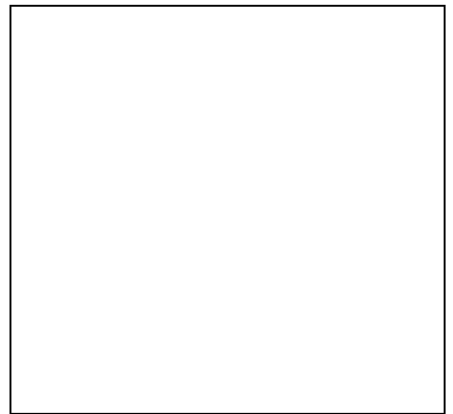
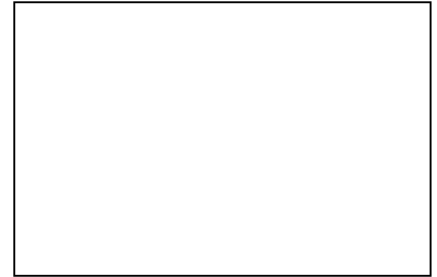
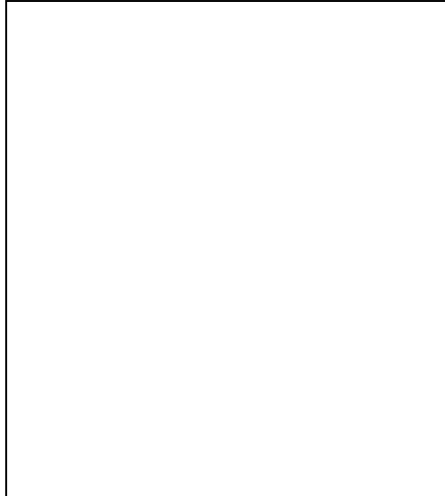
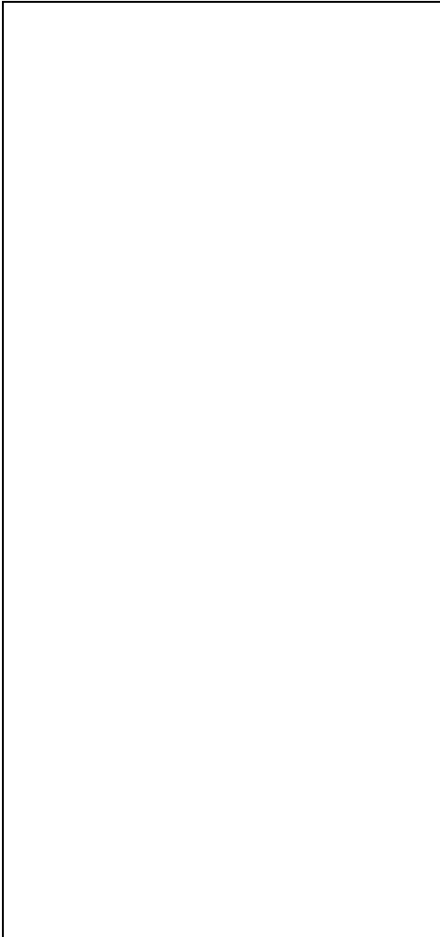
That day, 23 November 1954, almost a year after the CIA pronounced Downey and Fecteau "presumed dead," Beijing declared them alive, in custody, and serving their sentences as convicted CIA spies. The first that the Agency learned of it was through an FBIS intercept of a *New China News Agency* broadcast. At the same time, the Chinese announced the sentencing, also for espionage, of the officers and crew of a US Air Force B-29 aircraft, shot down over China some weeks after Downey's and Fecteau's C-47 flight. (U)

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**The DCI's proposal  
to press the  
Chinese for release  
went nowhere.**

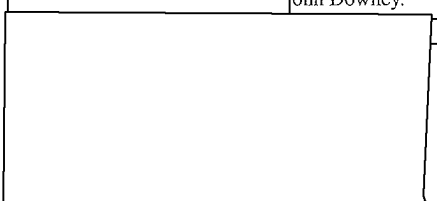
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Trying to Secure Release (U)



<sup>22</sup> A recent example is Larry Tart and Robert Keefe, *The Price of Vigilance: Attacks on American Surveillance Flights* (New York: Ballantine, 2001), 53–55. This book erroneously states that the CIA would have nothing to do with the men during and immediately after their captivity. (U)

<sup>23</sup> Richard M. Bissell Jr., Memorandum for the Record, 13 December 1954, in DCI records, [redacted] John Downey.”



“  
**Complaining was usually counterproductive.**  
”

For the next 15 years, US diplomats would bring up the matter during talks with Chinese counterparts in Geneva and Warsaw, but US policy that there would be no bargaining, no concessions, and no recognition of the Communist Chinese government prevented movement. (U)

**The Long Wait (U)**

There may be some among us who can imagine 20 days in captivity; perhaps a fraction of those can imagine a full year deprived of liberty and most human contact. But 20 years? Downey and Fecteau have consistently sought to downplay their period of imprisonment; and neither has done what arguably too many former CIA officers do these days with far less



justification: write a book. Downey has said that such a book would contain “500 blank pages,” and Fecteau says the whole experience could be summed up by the word “boring.” (U)

No doubt boredom was among their greatest enemies, but of course the men are downplaying a significant ordeal. What we know from the debriefings and other records is that living conditions in the first few years were harsh, improving after their trials to spartan. Their sparsely furnished, small cells were generally cold and drafty and allowed for little external stimuli—the windows were whitewashed and a dim light bulb burned constantly. Food was simple—almost exclusively rice, vegetables, and bread, with perhaps some meat




Downey and Fecteau in a propaganda photo with captured B-29 crew. (“E” points to Fecteau; Downey is at table, center right.) (U)

on holidays. Both spent stretches in solitary confinement that went on for years—one span was six years. While the most intense questioning ended with their trial and sentencing in late 1954, both were subjected throughout to verbal insults and psychological abuse, particularly of a kind that Fecteau called “the whip-saw”: improving conditions—such as better food, access to books, or a luxury such as soap—only to take them away. (U)

Worst of all were the hints at early releases. In 1955, for example, Downey and Fecteau were placed together in a large cell housing the Air Force officers and crew of the downed B-29. For three weeks, the group of Americans lived together, with little supervision and expanded privileges. The Chinese allowed the CIA men to believe they would be released with the Air Force group. Then, as Downey recalls, “the axe fell,” and he and Fecteau were suddenly removed into solitary confinement. (U)

Both men learned that complaining was usually counterproductive: Once when Fecteau said the tomatoes in his food gave him indigestion, all he saw for three weeks was tomatoes. After that, whenever asked, “How is the food?” Fecteau would always respond with “adequate.”<sup>25</sup> If he complained that there was not enough water for his weekly bath,

<sup>25</sup> Fecteau remembers once being given a food bucket containing a dead sparrow in water. “It had not been cleaned; it had been just boiled in the water and that was lunch.” 

“

To Fecteau, ‘the weeks  
seemed long,  
but the months went  
fast.’

”

there would be less water next time. Likewise, the men learned not to request medical treatment until a condition was serious enough to draw attention to it. [ ]

### Insights from Captivity (U)

Even if Downey and Fecteau do not consider their long captivity suitable for literary treatment, there is great value for today’s intelligence officers in how they played the bad hand dealt to them. Debriefings and other documents containing the men’s observations—most made shortly after their release when impressions were freshest—provide a series of “lessons learned” that could be relevant to others facing long captivity. (U)

*Never Give Up Hope.* Downey and Fecteau affirmed that they always believed the CIA and the US government were doing everything they could and that eventually they would be released. Both rejected Chinese assertions that they had been abandoned, that no one cared what happened to them. Fecteau, in fact, reasoned that he could never forget he was an American and an Agency man—his captors threw it in his face so often that he never lost his sense of identity and affiliation. Suicide was never contemplated by either man. [ ]

*Scale Down Expectations.* While never losing the strategic conviction that they would return home, the men learned to be wary, on a tactical level, of developments that were “too good to be

true.” Between periods of solitary confinement, for example, they often had one or two Chinese cellmates. If either Downey or Fecteau appeared to be getting on well with a Chinese prisoner, the American might find himself suddenly in solitary for a year. After one such “whipsaw,” Fecteau was asked by a guard: “Are you lonely now?” So the men disciplined themselves to lower expectations, to the point that when Fecteau was taken to the Hong Kong border in December 1971, he made himself assume that the release he had been promised was another “whipsaw,” until he actually crossed the bridge. Likewise, when Downey was told in 1973 that he was being released, he responded with indifference, saying he wanted to finish the televised ping-pong match he was watching. He recalls, “I had a tight rein on my expectations.” [ ]

*Create a Routine.* Both men said that it was essential to busy themselves with a daily schedule, no matter how mundane each task might be. The prison environment, of course, mandated a certain routine, but within that general outline, as Downey put it, one could organize “a very full program every day.”

*I had my day very tightly scheduled—and if I missed some of my own self-appointed appoint-*

*ments, I’d feel uneasy. As a result, the days really moved along. Whereas if you just sit there and think about home, feeling sorry for yourself, then time can really drag.* [ ]

Downey would leap out of bed at the prison’s morning whistle to begin a day that involved calisthenics, cleaning his cell, meals, reading and studying, listening to the radio, and “free time” with books and magazines from home.<sup>26</sup> Fecteau developed a similar routine but varied it by the day of the week, later saying, “the weeks seemed long but the months went fast.” The Chinese allowed them various periodicals like the *New Yorker* and *Sports Illustrated*. In addition, prayer and Bible study, as well as learning Chinese and Russian, composed a big part of Downey’s day. [ ]

*Get Physical.* Both men credit exercise—push-ups, sit-ups, chin-ups, jogging, and other calisthenics for as long as two or three hours every day—as vital to coping with the inactivity of imprisonment. Fecteau commented:

*I found that, although sometimes it was very difficult to make myself do it, it was a great help to my morale, especially if I*

<sup>26</sup> After the first three years, each man could receive letters and one family package per month and send one letter. In addition, they received monthly Red Cross packages. Incoming mail was searched and read, with material objectionable to the Chinese Communists withheld. (U)

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### They discovered 'You cannot really be brainwashed.'

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*was depressed. If I got up, pushed myself to do exercises, it would make a tremendous difference in my spirit. It also made me feel better, made me sleep better, but it was a lot more than just physical [benefit]. The effect on my mental outlook, what I thought of at the time as toughening my mind, was just tremendous.* [ ]

*I remembered every kid in my sixth-grade class and where each one sat. I pictured myself leaving my house in Lynn and driving to Gloucester and every sight I'd see on the way . . . I could lose four hours just like that.*

Party platforms; and the like. Downey, at first, was agitated by this, but he did not resist, thinking that he could fake enough ideological reform to be granted a pardon when the 10th anniversary of their capture came along in 1962—in retrospect, a vain hope. In any case, he found that he had worried too much:

*One of the things that relaxed me was the eventual discovery that you cannot really be brainwashed . . . There are some things they can't change [and] basically I came out about the same as I went in . . . They could scare you into saying just about anything, maybe scare me, I should say, but actually believing it is a much more difficult proposition.*

*Keep a Secret Space for Yourself.* While not explicitly stated in the debriefings and interviews, it is clear that an important coping mechanism was each man's ability to fence off a part of his mind. They seemed to derive psychological benefit from keeping its very existence secret from their captors. [ ]

Fecteau also developed complex stories involving made-up characters—a boxer, a baseball player, a football player, an actor, and a songwriter—that became for him almost like watching a movie. As his skill increased, he could even mentally change “reels.” (U)

Likewise, Fecteau observed that “they couldn't wash my brains or change my thinking unless I changed.” [ ]

[ ] he also kept in his mind the thought that, as an American and a CIA officer, he was in competition with the guard, the prison, and the Chinese regime. That helped his self-discipline in not shouting or complaining but enduring in silence. Both men reported that they enjoyed telling their captors the opposite of what they were thinking. [ ]

*Remember that a Brain Cannot be Washed.* In 1952, rumors of Chinese “brainwashing” were rampant because of the behavior of returned US prisoners from Chinese custody during the Korean War.<sup>27</sup> It is not surprising, then, that both Downey and Fecteau were fearful, particularly in the early years, that they would be turned into ideological zombies or traitors to the United States. Their concerns were heightened by Chinese rhetoric that they must show true repentance and remold their thinking. While they were allowed non-communist reading materials, from about 1959 to 1969, they were required to participate in daily study and discussions of the works of Marx, Lenin, and Mao; the Communist

Both men recognized at least three benefits from the study sessions: They helped structure the days and pass the time; they provided human interaction, however stilted and contrived; and they gave insights into communist thinking and Chinese culture. As Fecteau put it: “I began to understand how they thought and what they meant when they said this or that to me. So then I began to look at the studies a bit differently [as] an opportunity to study them and to understand them.” [ ]

Both men used their imaginations to good effect. Downey enjoyed thinking, especially in the presence of an interrogator, guard, or prison official, about how his salary was accumulating—he knew that his \$4,000-a-year salary was something none of his captors would ever see. Fecteau said he taught himself to become “an expert daydreamer”:

<sup>27</sup> See Abbot Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War* (London: Oxford University Press, 1997), 92–95. (U)

*Care for Each Other.* Although Downey and Fecteau saw each other infrequently during the two decades, they developed a

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**Humor, more than any training, helped to sustain them.**  
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communications system. In the first years, they used distinctive coughs to track each other's whereabouts, or wrote words or sports scores in the dust under the toilet seat. Later, they found ways to deliver notes and also used *sotto voce* comments when possible.<sup>28</sup> They were always in the same prison, and not far from each other, which kept their spirits up more than if they had been imprisoned in separate cities. [ ]

Even through the years of solitary confinement, each man drew comfort from the thought of his nearby comrade. When Fecteau was told of his impending release, his first question was whether Downey would be coming out, too. After release, Fecteau spurned lucrative offers to tell his story publicly because of the impact it might have on Downey's fate. To this day, the men remain close friends. [ ]

*Find Humor Where You Can.* In recruiting Downey and Fecteau, the CIA had noted that each man had a well-developed sense of humor. This quality, far more than any particular training, helped sustain them. There was little in their situation that made for flippancy, but they were able to see the humor in the incongru-

<sup>28</sup> A note could be hidden inside chewing gum and tossed into a cell, although that was risky. When mopping the prison corridor, one could drop a note through the peephole of the other's cell, if a guard was not looking. Eventually, the men developed a deaddrop in the cell block's toilet room for notes. Downey reports he was only caught twice in 20 years. [ ]

ous and the absurd. Downey, the more serious of the two, was amused at the about-face required in his study sessions, when he was expounding the Soviet line about Albania before he became aware that the new Chinese line was anti-Soviet! Fecteau reflected for long periods on humorous stories he would hear from cellmates: about the man jailed for fortune telling who produced a pack of cards in his cell, or the man ridiculed by his cellmates for believing that the world rested on the back of huge turtle. He was amused by a book he was given, written by an Australian communist, which glowingly described Chinese prison conditions quite at variance with his own experience. [ ]

*Be Patient.* Because of insufficient training, both men acknowledged it took several years to develop effective coping strategies. At the beginning, each thought he was going crazy. Fecteau says he started to have "mental aberrations": "The walls started moving in on me. I would put my foot out in front of me and measure the distance to be sure the wall wasn't really moving." Downey, besides being "extremely scared," was frustrated to the point of despair, seeing every day in prison as a day robbed from him. As the men learned how to deal with their fate, it became easier. Fecteau did not have a vivid imagination at first, but he developed one as a

skill. Downey maintained that, had he been released after only five years, he would have come out in far worse shape than he did after 20 years. [ ]

**On the Home Front (U)**

It was the exemplary manner in which CIA headquarters handled Downey's and Fecteau's affairs that partially redeems the disaster that led to their predicament. Once the Chinese had broken the news that the two were alive, the Agency quickly restored them to the active payroll. DCI Dulles had them moved administratively from the Far East Division to a special list maintained by the Office of Personnel (OP). OP officer [ ] [ ] handled their affairs until 1957; thereafter, it was Ben DeFelice.<sup>29</sup> [ ]

Although no precedent existed for administering the affairs of civilian federal employees subjected to lengthy foreign imprisonment, OP creatively applied existing law in managing the three primary areas: pay and allotments, promotions, and maintenance of accrued funds. In addition, OP representatives took on the delicate matter of dealing with the men's families. In making decisions on behalf of Downey and Fecteau, OP drew guidance from the Missing Persons Act of

<sup>29</sup> The facts and chronology for this section are [ ]

[ ] See also Ben DeFelice's oral history interview of 5 January 1998, in CIA History Staff files. [ ]

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**The Agency creatively applied existing law to manage pay and promotions.**

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1942—intended for military MIAs—and subsequent Agency regulations. (U)

Pay was the easiest area to address. Keeping the men's pay accounts in a current status would allow both the accrual of pay and the immediate payment of funds upon their release. OP also ensured that the men received separation allowances and post differentials, which were applied retroactively and carried for the entire period of their imprisonment, in recognition of the "excessively adverse" conditions of the two men's "foreign assignment." Deductions were made for federal income taxes and held in escrow until such time as the men could file. (U)

In 1958, when it looked as though the men would not be released for a long time, DCI Dulles approved an OP plan to promote them from GS-7 to GS-11, with a schedule of interim promotions and step increases applied in a graduated, retroactive manner over the previous five years. Once their ranks were in line with their contemporaries, Agency officials ensured regular promotions and step increases as if they had continued unimpeded in their careers. Eventually the Director of Personnel determined that Downey and Fecteau should be promoted to the journeyman level during their imprisonment, which was set at GS-13; then one grade was added to help compensate for the deprivations of captivity. So the terminal rank for the two was established at GS-14, to which

both were promoted in 1971, just before Fecteau's release. Both men, after their release, were startled to learn of the promotions and that they were earning some \$22,000 per year—they were still thinking in terms of their 1952 GS-7 salaries of just over \$4,000. (U)

Of bigger concern to OP was handling the accrued funds responsibly. DeFelice later outlined his philosophy: "We couldn't give them [back] their years of imprisonment, but we could at least assure financial security for their future." Doing so required considerable ingenuity. The accrued funds were initially invested in Series E savings bonds, but the sums soon passed the \$10,000 annual ceiling. From 1960 to 1963, the funds were invested in savings certificates under pseudonyms, but this had to be abandoned when the Internal Revenue Service started requiring banks to report interest income to depositors. Then, for about a year, the Agency simply credited the accounts with interest payments at the prevailing bank rate. Finally, in late 1964, OP got DCI John McCone to approve the release of the funds

[redacted] for investment and interest. When Fecteau was released in 1971, his accumulated account came to almost \$140,000; Downey's in 1973 came

to more than \$170,000. Each figure represented a nest egg of about seven times each man's annual salary as a GS-14 at the time. [redacted]

**Family Issues (U)**

Taking care of the families also required imaginative management. Downey and Fecteau were allowed monthly packages from family, which they relied on for morale and physical health—the food and vitamin supplements augmented their sparse diet.

[redacted] Legally, the Agency could not simply give them the money to pay for the packages. Beginning in 1959, DeFelice's creative solution was to have the Agency apply an "equalization allowance" to the men's pay—typically used to offset the excess cost of living at a duty post; it was a stretch to apply this to life in a Chinese cell. This amount—several hundred dollars per year—was passed along to the families by allotment. It was made retroactive to the date of their capture. [redacted]

Allotments for the families were authorized based on the presumption of the men's wishes. Educational expenses for Fecteau's twin daughters from his first marriage, for example, were covered by allotments from his pay account. [redacted]

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**CIA covertly paid for travel once family visits were allowed.**

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Downey was strong willed and capable of lecturing the most senior government officials in every administration from Eisenhower to Nixon on the need for the United States to do more to free her son. DeFelice says he talked to Mary Downey at least weekly, for up to several hours at a time. Costs of the calls were always borne by the Agency. DeFelice and other OP officials also wrote hundreds of letters and made dozens of visits to family members over the years. (U)

**Release and Readjustment (U)**

In the end, of course, this tragic tale becomes a happy one, with the men restored to freedom and the Agency continuing its extraordinary efforts to see these extraordinary men into ordinary retirement. Fecteau's release in December 1971, and Downey's 15 months later, came about in the context of the warming of relations between the United States and China. In particular, 1971 was the year of "ping pong diplomacy,"<sup>31</sup> the lifting of US trade

<sup>30</sup> Fecteau's mother was upset by the sight of him in prison in 1958. Fecteau discouraged her from coming again, so she never made a return trip. Fecteau's father refused to go, fearing he would express anger at the Chinese authorities and make his son's predicament worse. After 1958, then, all trips were made by Downey family members. (U)

<sup>31</sup> The easing of travel restrictions on athletic teams. (U)

restrictions, National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger's secret mission to Beijing, and the seating of the People's Republic of China at the UN. That fall, the two captives were taken to a Beijing department store, for the first time, for new clothing and overcoats. Fecteau remarked to Downey that "either we are on our way out or we are going to stay in for another 20 years." (U)

On 9 December 1971, Fecteau was summoned to a tribunal, which informed him of his impending release. Asking about Downey, Fecteau was told that Downey's case was more serious and that he would not be going. Fecteau was allowed to leave some of his belongings for Downey, but because a guard stood all the while in front of Downey's cell, Fecteau could not communicate with him. After a train trip to Canton, Fecteau found himself walking across the Lo-Wu bridge to Hong Kong. He had served 19 years and 14 days of his 20-year sentence. At the US consulate, he had a cigarette and a beer, which he described as "incredible." [redacted]

[redacted] soon Fecteau was being examined at Valley Forge Military Hospital. His physical condition astounded the doctors, but his demeanor was extremely reserved—not used to interacting with people, he spoke in a low voice only when spoken to and preferred to have decisions made for him. Within days, however, he began opening up and taking charge of his new life, and soon

[redacted]

The Agency also helped family members with the several trips they made to visit the prisoners, starting in 1958 when both mothers and Downey's brother went. The CIA could do nothing officially to facilitate the trips because diplomatic relations did not exist with the People's Republic of China and US policy required the prisoners' CIA affiliation to be concealed. The Agency gave the travelers briefings on what to expect—with regard to the communist authorities and the prisoners' likely attitudes—and what topics and behavior to avoid. Because such trips were beyond the means of the families—and to keep the prisoners' accounts from being depleted—DCI Dulles authorized the disbursement of Agency funds to the families, [redacted]. From 1958 to the last visit in 1971, the Agency spent more than \$35,000 on travel expenses for the prisoners' families.<sup>30</sup> [redacted]

As the Agency's point of contact for the families, Ben DeFelice held thousands of phone conversations over the years, especially with Downey's mother. Mary



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**Warming bilateral relations finally led to their release.**  
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he was back at work giving a series of interviews on his experience. Worried about Downey, Fecteau was careful to say in public that he harbored no bitterness toward the Chinese people or their government.

At the time of Fecteau's release, Beijing announced that Downey's sentence had been reduced from life imprisonment to five years from that date—a bitter disappointment both to the Agency and to the Downey family, particularly his mother, by then in her seventies and in failing health. Despite the high-level talks and interventions, it was her severe stroke in early March 1973 that accomplished her son's release.



Downey crossing into Hong Kong and freedom in 1973 (U).

President Nixon's appeal to Beijing on humanitarian grounds— together with his admission the previous month in a press conference that Downey was a CIA employee—led to his freedom after 20 years, 3 months, and 14 days in prison. He crossed the border into Hong Kong on 12 March, noting that the salute he received from a British soldier at his crossing was the first act of dignity shown him in 20 years. He arrived at his mother's bedside the next day. Recovered enough to recognize her son, Mary Downey admonished him: "You're a celebrity now, don't let it go to your head." (U)

**Getting on with Life (U)**

Both men came home in good physical and mental shape, free of grudges, surprised at their GS-14 rank and accumulated pay, stunned by changes in the American landscape and culture, and grateful for what the Agency had done with their affairs. Both were restored to East Asia Division as operations officers and underwent a series of debriefings. Each received the Distinguished Intelligence Medal for "courageous performance" in enduring "sufferings and deprivations, measured in decades, with fortitude [and an] unshakable will to survive and with a preserving faith in his country." Fecteau also was awarded the Intelligence Medal of Merit for his conduct following his release,

when he refused lucrative offers from the media and publishers to tell his story, in order to protect Downey's chances for release.

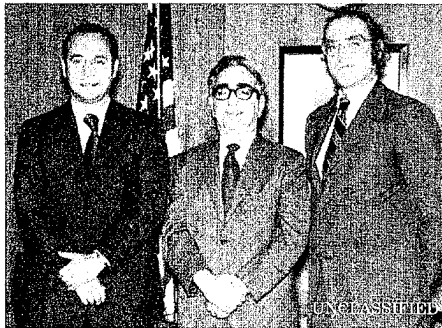
Downey and Fecteau were interested in qualifying for retirement, but even with all their years in prison, they were short of the necessary 25 years. To make up the deficit, DeFelice made sure that both received all the annual leave they had accumulated over two decades—90 percent of which had technically been forfeited but was now restored. OP also helped the men gain all the creditable government service due them—both had worked temporary jobs with the post office in the 1940s, and Fecteau had served in the Merchant Marine for a year. The final trick up DeFelice's sleeve was his initiative, following the Pentagon's example with its returning military POWs, to add one year's "convalescent leave" to each man's accumulated sick leave. This allowed Downey and Fecteau to attend to their own affairs while drawing full CIA salaries for some time after coming home. Downey used the time to go to Harvard Law School, and Fecteau worked on home projects, took care of his parents, and sought work as a probation officer. Fecteau qualified for retirement in 1976; Downey, in 1977.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Downey/ Fecteau personnel files. Fecteau's Merchant Marine service allowed him to retire before Downey even though the latter had spent more time in CIA service. (U)

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**The most enduring  
lesson is to make every  
day lived in freedom  
count.**  
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Richard Fecteau and John Downey have lived up to their desire to focus on the future and not dwell on the past. They have refused to make careers out of their experience and instead have lived full lives since returning to America:

- Downey became a respected judge in Connecticut, specializing in juvenile matters. Now retired, he continues to take on cases as needed. The Judge John T. Downey Courthouse in New Haven is named for him. He married in 1975; his wife, a Chinese-American, was born in Manchuria not far from where the plane was shot down. They have an adult son.
- Fecteau returned to his alma mater, Boston University, as assistant athletic director, retiring in 1989. He reconnected with his adult daughters, who



Fecteau (left) and Downey (right), with personnel officer Ben DeFelice, June 1974. (U)

were three years old when he was shot down, and he remarried his first wife, who had kept him in her prayers while he was in prison.

- Both have maintained friendships with former colleagues and retain their sense of Agency affiliation. (U)

DCI George Tenet brought Downey and Fecteau back to the CIA in 1998, 25 years after Downey's release, to present them with the Director's Medal. Their story, Tenet declared, "is one of the most remarkable in the history of the Central Intelligence Agency." On the occasion, Fecteau affirmed "This is still my outfit and always will be," and Downey declared "I am proud to be one of you." Tenet spoke of their "extraordinary fidelity"—words also inscribed on their medals—and told them: "Like it or not, you are our heroes." Downey, speaking for himself and for Fecteau, replied: "We're at the age where, if you want to call us heroes, we're not going to argue anymore, [but] we know better." (U)

John Downey, 22 when he began his captivity and almost 43 when released, is now almost 76. Richard Fecteau, 25 when shot down and 44 on his return, will be 80 next year. Their story, and the lessons we derive from it, will long outlive them. Their experience in China teaches many things: the importance of good decisions in the field and the costs of bad ones; the ability of men to say "it's not over" when life seems to be at an end; the resilience to get through a bad day—7,000 times in a row; and the strength gained from faith that one is still cared about. But their experience back home is also inspirational, for it teaches us that perhaps the most enduring lesson of all is the absolute necessity of making every day lived in freedom count. (U)



Fecteau (left) and Downey (right) with DCI George Tenet after receiving the Director's medal in 1998. (U)