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# Two CIA Prisoners in China, 1952–73

## *Extraordinary Fidelity*

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*This article draws extensively on operational files and other internal CIA records that of necessity remain classified. Because the true story of these two CIA officers is compelling and has been distorted in many public accounts, it is retold here in as much detail as possible, despite minimal source citations. Whenever possible, references to open sources are made in the footnotes.*

***“Shot down on their first operational mission, Downey and Fecteau spent two decades in Chinese prisons.”***

Beijing's capture, imprisonment, and eventual release of CIA officers John T. Downey and Richard G. Fecteau is an amazing story that too few 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 place they had left, but both adjusted surprisingly well and continue to live full lives.

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.

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.

## ***The Operational Context***

John Downey and Richard Fecteau were youthful CIA paramilitary officers: Downey, born in Connecticut, had entered 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 on their first overseas assignment when

the shutdown occurred.

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. While largely true, the flight the men were on was part of operations that had antecedents in the US response to the communist takeover of China in 1949. In accordance with US policies, CIA took steps to exploit the potential for a Chinese “Third Force” by trying to link Chinese agents, trained by CIA, with alleged dissident generals on the mainland. This Third Force, while anticommunist, would be separate from the Nationalists, who were assessed to be largely discredited on the mainland.<sup>[2]</sup>

This Third Force project received new emphasis after the Communist Chinese intervened in the Korean War. At that point, the project aimed to divert Chinese resources from the war in Korea by promoting domestic antigovernment guerrilla operations. This was to be accomplished by small teams of Chinese agents, generally inserted through airdrops, who were to link up with local guerrilla forces, collect intelligence and possibly engage in sabotage and psychological warfare, and report back by radio.<sup>[3]</sup> The operational model was the OSS experience in Europe during World War II, which assumed a cooperative captive population—a situation, as it turned out, that did not prevail in China.

By the time of Downey and Fecteau’s involvement in the Third Force program, its record was short and inauspicious. Because of resource constraints, the training of Chinese agents at CIA facilities in Asia was delayed, and the first Third Force team to be airdropped did not deploy until April 1952. This fourman team parachuted into southern China and was never heard from again.

The second Third Force team comprised five ethnic Chinese dropped into the Jilin region of Manchuria in midJuly 1952. Downey was well known to the Chinese operatives on this team because he had trained them. The team quickly established radio contact with Downey’s CIA unit outside of China and was resupplied by air in August and October. A sixth team member, intended as a courier between the team and the controlling CIA unit, was dropped in September. In early November, the team reported contact with a local dissident leader and said it had obtained needed operational documents such as official credentials. They requested airexfiltration of the courier, a method he had trained for but that the CIA had never attempted operationally.

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 the CIA's proprietary 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, Downey's CIA unit radioed back to the team: "Will air snatch approximately 2400 hours" on 29 November.<sup>[4]</sup>

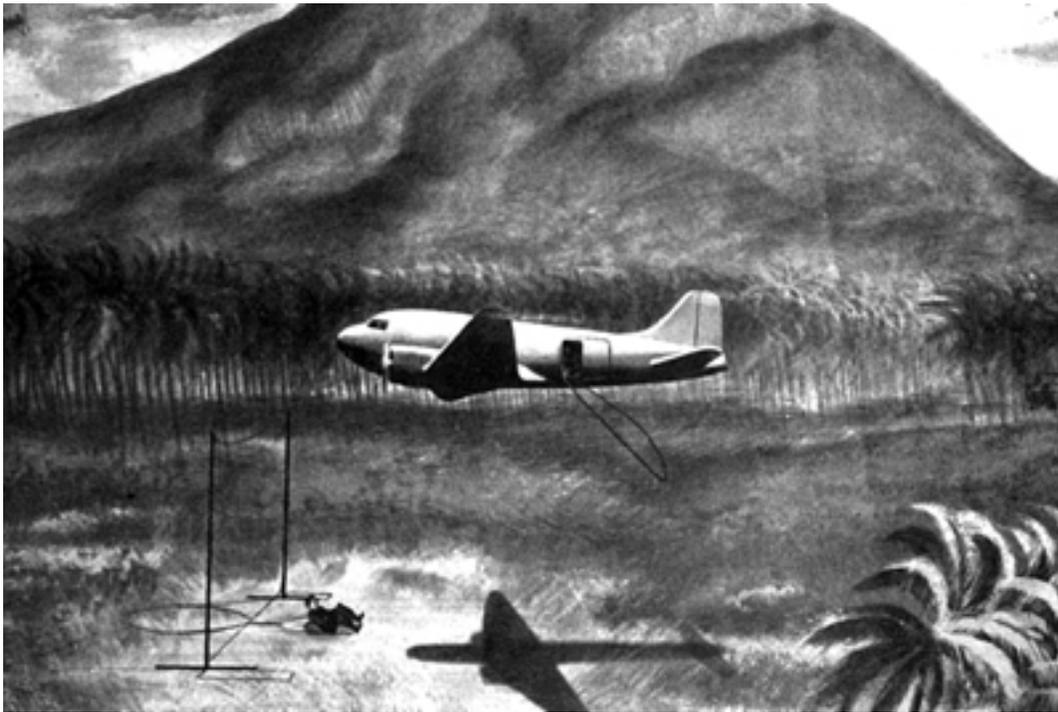


Illustration of snatch pickup, from 1944 US Army Air Forces manual.

The question of who would operate the winch, however, was still unresolved. Originally, Chinese crewmen were to be used, but Downey's unit chief decided that time was too short to fully train them. Instead, two CAT personnel trained in the procedure were identified for the pickup flight, but the CIA unit chief pulled them four days before the mission because they lacked the requisite clearances. Downey, who had been at the unit for about a year, and Fecteau, who had arrived in the first week of November, were directed to fill the breach. They were hurriedly trained in the procedure during the week of 24 November.

Late on 29 November, Downey and Fecteau boarded Schwartz and Snoddy's olive drab C47 on an airfield on the Korean peninsula 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.

## *Mission Gone Awry*

The C47, with its CAT pilots and CIA crew, was heading for a trap. The agent team, unbeknownst to the men on the flight, had been captured by Communist Chinese security forces and had been turned.<sup>[5]</sup> The request for exfiltration was a ruse, and the promised documentation and purported contact with a local dissident leader were merely bait. The team members almost certainly had told Chinese authorities everything they knew about the operation and about 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 C47 arrived at the pickup point.<sup>[6]</sup>

Reaching the designated area around midnight, the aircraft received the proper recognition signal from the ground.<sup>[7]</sup> Downey and Fecteau pushed out supplies for the agent team—food and equipment needed for the aerial pickup. Then Schwartz and Snoddy flew the aircraft away from the area to allow the team time to set up the poles and line for the “snatch.” Returning about 45 minutes later and receiving a ready signal, the C47 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 C47 came in low for the pickup, flying nearly at its stall 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, straddling the

flight path, began a murderous crossfire. At this point, a crowd of men emerged from the woods.<sup>[8]</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.

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."

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>[9]</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.

## ***Assessing Field Responsibility***

Over the years, various explanations arose within CIA to explain Downey and Fecteau's participation in the illfated mission. It seemed incredible to operations 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 Chinese Communists. One of the most persistent myths was that the two must have been joyriding because their participation was, it was thought, a violation of the rules. In fact, the record shows that they were directed to be on the flight and that they had received specialized training in preparation for it. It may have been poor judgment on the part of Downey and Fecteau's boss, the CIA unit chief—

who in fixing a tactical problem (the lack of security clearances by aircraft personnel) created a strategic vulnerability—and certainly it appears so in hindsight. In any case, it was only *after* the shutdown that the rules were changed so that no CIA officer would fly over the Chinese mainland.<sup>[10]</sup>

In addition to the field shortcomings in assigning Downey and Fecteau to the fatal mission, there is the question of whether the field ignored warnings that the deployed team had been turned by the communists. Such is the claim of a former senior operations officer who, as a young man, had served in Downey and Fecteau's unit in 1952. This officer asserts that, in the summer before the November flight, an analysis of two messages sent by the team made it "90 percent" certain, in his view, that the team had been doubled. Bringing his concerns to the attention of the unit chief, the officer was rebuffed for lack of further evidence. When he persisted, he was transferred to another CIA unit. After Downey and Fecteau's flight failed to return, the unit chief called the officer back and told him not to talk about the matter, and he followed instructions—much to his later regret.

No record of an inquiry into the decision to send Downey and Fecteau on the flight appears to exist. It is clear that no one was ever disciplined for it, probably because it was a wartime decision in the field. Moreover, it could be argued that the success of the August and October missions to resupply the team indicated that the team had not been doubled. Many years later, Downey told a debriefer that he felt no bitterness toward the man who sent him on the mission: "I felt for him. It turned out to be such a goddamned disaster from his point of view."

## ***Men without a Future***

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

## ***Reaction at Home***

Several hours after the scheduled time of pickup, the CIA field unit received a message from the agent team, reporting that the snatch had been successful. However, when the C47 was overdue for its return on the morning of 30 November 1952, CIA worked with Civil Air Transport to concoct a cover story—a CAT aircraft on a commercial flight from Korea to Japan on 3 December was missing and, as of 4 December, was presumed lost in the Sea of Japan. Downey and Fecteau were identified as Department of the Army civilian employees. 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 commercial plane flight between South Korea and Japan which is now overdue and that there is grave fear that he may have been lost."

By mid-December, CIA had made the official determination that the men were missing in action; however, within the Agency's 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. 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>[11]</sup>

## ***The Interrogations***

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 sleeping during the day and the Chinese would invariably haul them off for middleofthenight 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."

During the first two years of their captivity, while no one outside of China knew their fate, the men were subjected to enormous pressure to confess that they were CIA spies, repent of their "crimes," and tell everything they knew about CIA personnel, operations, and locations. The deck was stacked because the Chinese authorities already knew much from this Third Force agent team and from others they had caught. Downey and Fecteau's training had covered subjects like "Resistance" and "Police Methods," but it was inadequate for this dilemma. Fecteau, in fact, lamented the lack of relevant training: "We had none, and it really hurt me. I had to play it by ear as I went along, and I was never sure whether I was right or wrong." He even remembered being told in training that, "if you are captured by the communists, you might as well tell them what you know because they are going to get it from you anyway." Downey, similarly, had been told by an instructor, "If you are captured, you'll talk." It certainly did not help that the men knew so much—Downey was intimately familiar with Third Force operations from his experience over the previous year; Fecteau had been in the field for only three weeks but had carried out his supervisor's order to familiarize himself with the program by reading the operational files for two or three hours every day.

Both men initially tried to stick to their cover story. Unfortunately, both were told before the flight to say they were CAT employees, which was at variance with the official cover story that they were US Army civilians on a commercial flight. Their Chinese interrogators caught them out and made subsequent interrogations more intensive and confrontational.

The men were never tortured physically or, after their initial capture,

beaten.<sup>[12]</sup> Fecteau reported that he wore leg irons constantly for the first 10 months and that he was made to stand during 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, plus the added mental stress from concocting new stories after the cover story evaporated—as he later acknowledged, telling lies requires an extraordinarily good memory.

Eventually both men—isolated from each other, battered psychologically, threatened with torture and execution—talked, albeit divulging varying degrees of truth. Downey, hemmed in by the disclosures of the team he had trained, confessed his CIA affiliation on the 16th day. He later recalled that telling what he knew was liberating: “I’m free and they have got to leave me in peace, and thus relieve the psychological strain of resisting... [They] can’t come at me anymore mentally because it is all out there.”

Fecteau, who was unknown to the captured Chinese assets, had an easier situation to manage:

*The story I decided to stick to, I decided to keep it as simple as possible, was to tell them only what I needed to know to be where I was. I decided to add nothing else. I decided to shorten my length of service with the Agency from November 1951 [and] changed that to June 1952, to give me only five months in the Agency [to] make it much easier to explain to the interrogators. I thus cut out a lot of the training I had taken, cut down on the number of names they would ask of people I had met within the Agency and so forth. I based it all on “need to know,” only what I needed to know to be where I was.*

*They kept asking for names, names, names. I decided that all Agency names except classmates [from training], I would tell them only first names and I stuck with that all the way, instructors, people in Washington, all first names only. As to personnel [in the field], I told them that I had only been there three weeks and I only knew first names there also.... On the names of classmates I knew they would ask not only the names but character descriptions, physical descriptions. I then decided to give the names of my fellow teammates on the Boston University football team [to] be able to give them very good character descriptions.*

Fecteau made his “cover confession” on the 13th day, after thinking it through the previous night. This technique of Fecteau’s— which Downey almost certainly could not have employed without tripping up against what

the Chinese already knew—enabled Fecteau to withhold information safely for his entire imprisonment, and it turned out to be a huge morale boost: “The thing that sustained me most through the 19 years was the fact that I didn’t tell them everything I had known. Whenever I felt depressed, this was the greatest help to me.” Even so, both men, but especially Downey, were plagued by feelings of guilt for the information they had given up.<sup>[13]</sup>

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>[14]</sup>

## ***Back From the Dead***

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 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 had 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 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 B29 aircraft, shot

down over China some weeks after Downey and Fecteau's C47 flight.

## *Trying to Secure Release*

The Agency quickly assembled an ad hoc committee under Richard M. Bissell Jr., then a special assistant to the DCI. Bissell's committee accepted the Chinese declaration as true and changed the men's status from "presumed dead" to "missing in action." Further, the committee decided to backstop the cover story that Downey and Fecteau were Army civilians traveling as passengers on a contract aircraft between Korea and Japan; this required coordination with the Pentagon and dealing with some two dozen persons outside the government who were aware of the CIA affiliation of either Downey or Fecteau: family members, officials of three insurance companies, two banks, several lawyers, and the executor of an estate. Despite the potential for leaks, the true status of the two men was kept secret by authoritative sources for many years, and there was no deviation from the cover story for two decades.

Contrary to the public histories that claim the CIA "abandoned" the men during their captivity, the Agency continually argued for official US efforts to induce the Chinese to free them and monitored such efforts on the part of the State Department and other agencies.<sup>[15]</sup> As soon as it was known that the men were alive in late 1954, Bissell proposed that the US government put pressure—diplomatic and covert—on Beijing to free the men. Bissell was authorized to convene a working group to study the problem, but his proposal went nowhere. Other US agencies were against forceful action against China; at least one based its opposition on the assessment that Beijing had a good case in international law against Downey and Fecteau.<sup>[16]</sup>

Throughout the years of the men's imprisonment, senior CIA officers met periodically to discuss the case with counterparts at the State Department and the Pentagon. During discussions in 1955 of a general release of military prisoners associated with Korean War operations, the Agency was rebuffed within the US government in its attempts to include Downey and Fecteau in such a release, despite strong and highlevel CIA representations that the CIA prisoners should be treated in the same way as US military personnel shot down and captured by the Chinese.

The rationale given for separating the two categories was that if the same line were adopted for military and civilian personnel, Beijing might then deny the prisoner of war status of the former, and all would remain in captivity. Thus, Washington took the case of its military personnel to the UN General Assembly but did not include Downey and Fecteau in its demand for release.

CIA was alone in the US government in pressing the issue. China released US military prisoners in 1955 but continued to maintain that Downey and Fecteau were on a mission unrelated to the Korean War. And, despite protests from CIA, official Washington kept up the fiction that they were Army civilians whose flight strayed into Chinese airspace. 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.

## ***The Long Wait***

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.”<sup>[17]</sup>



Downey and Fecteau with captured B-29 crew in a Chinese propaganda photo. (Fecteau is standing to the right of the table, reaching down for a meal.

No doubt boredom was among their greatest enemies, but of course the men are downplaying a significant ordeal. What we know 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 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 whipsaw”: their captors would improve conditions—providing better food, access to books and magazines, or a luxury such as soap—only to take them away.

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 B29. 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.

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—green tomatoes. After that, whenever he was asked, “How is the food?” Fecteau would always respond with “adequate.”<sup>[18]</sup> If he complained that there was not enough water for his weekly bath, 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*

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. The men’s reflections on their imprisonment—generally made shortly after their release, when impressions were freshest—provide a series of “lessons learned” that could be relevant to others facing long captivity.

*Never Give Up Hope.* Downey and Fecteau affirmed that they always believed that 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 pingpong 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 appointments, 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 letters, books and magazines from home.<sup>[19]</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 occasionally allowed them 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. Ironically, CIA had assessed Downey in 1951 as disliking both being indoors and keeping to a fixed schedule.

*Get Physical.* Both men credit exercise—pushups, situps, chinups, 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 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.*

*Keep a Secret Space for Yourself.* It is clear that an important coping mechanism was each man’s ability to fence off a part of his mind, deriving psychological benefit from keeping its very existence secret from the captors. Not only did Fecteau get a morale boost from being able to manufacture a consistent “cover confession,” 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 selfdiscipline 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.

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 \$4,000ayear salary was something none of his captors would ever see. Fecteau said he taught himself to become “an expert daydreamer”:

*I remembered every kid in my sixthgrade 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.*

Fecteau also developed in his mind complex stories involving madeup 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 imaginative skill increased, he could even mentally change “reels.”

*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>[20]</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 noncommunist 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 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.*

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

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.”

*Care for Each Other.* Although Downey and Fecteau saw each other infrequently during the two decades, they developed a 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 where the other man would see it. Later, they found ways to deliver notes and also used *sotto voce* comments when possible.<sup>[21]</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, CIA had noted that each man had a welldeveloped 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 incongruous and the absurd. Downey, the more serious of the two, was amused at the aboutface required in his study sessions, when he was expounding the Soviet line about Albania before he became aware that the new Chinese line was antiSoviet! 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, that 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***

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 George Cary handled their affairs until 1957; thereafter, it was Ben DeFelice.

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 1942—intended for military MIAs—and subsequent Agency regulations.

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.

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 GS7 to GS11, 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 GS13; then one grade was added to help compensate for the deprivations of captivity. So the terminal rank for the two was established at GS14, 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 GS7 salaries of just over \$4,000.

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 accounts 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 investing the funds through a covert proprietary company. 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 GS14 at the time.

## ***Family Issues***

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. While Downey’s mother could afford the cost of these packages, it was a financial hardship for Fecteau’s parents. 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.

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. When CIA representatives visited Fecteau’s parents and saw their modest standard of living based on a fixed retirement income, allotments to them from Fecteau’s pay account were increased, based on the assumption that Fecteau would have so decided.

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. 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 through intermediaries for travel expenses.<sup>[22]</sup>

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 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 reported 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.

# ***Release and Readjustment***



Downey crossing Hong Kong and freedom in 1973.

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," the lifting of US trade 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, including overcoats. Fecteau remarked to Downey that "either we are on our way out or we are going to stay in for another 20 years."

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 LoWu bridge to Hong Kong. A British army officer gave him a cigarette and a beer, which he described as "incredible." Fecteau had served 19 years and 14 days of his 20-year sentence.

The CIA evacuation plan, which had existed since 1955, was put in motion and soon Fecteau was being examined at Valley Forge Military Hospital. His physical condition astounded the doctors,<sup>[23]</sup> 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 he was back at work giving 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. 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."

## *Getting on with Life*

Both men came home in good physical and mental shape, free of grudges, surprised at their GS14 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 CIA's East Asia Division as operations officers and underwent a series of debriefings.<sup>[24]</sup> 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, in order to protect Downey's chances for release, he refused lucrative offers from the media and publishers to tell his story.

Both men, understandably, 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>[25]</sup>

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, working three or four days a week. The Judge John T. Downey Courthouse in New Haven is named for him. He married in 1975; his Chinese American wife, Audrey, 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 were two 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.

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."

John Downey, 22 when he began his captivity and almost 43 when released, is now 76. Richard Fecteau, 25 when shot down and 44 on his return, will be 80 next August. 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.

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## Footnotes:

[1]Downey's and Fecteau's CIA affiliation was revealed as early as 1957 by a disgruntled former USIA official 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*.

[2]Declassified reference to Third Force covert operations is available in a National Security Council report on "Current Policies of the Government of the United States Relating to the National Security," 1 November 1952, reproduced in *Declassified Documents Reference System* (Farmington Hills, Michigan: Gale Group, 2006), document CK3100265583. A description of the Chinese Third Force program is also available in the cleared account by former CIA officer James Lilley, later US Ambassador to Beijing, *China Hands: Nine Decades of Adventure, Espionage, and Diplomacy in Asia* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), 78–83. Lilley describes the "three prongs" of CIA covert operations against the Chinese mainland at the time: the first was support of Nationalist efforts, the second was the Third Force program, and the third comprised unilateral operations. For a personal story of CIA's China operations in concert with the Nationalist Chinese, see Frank Holober, *Raiders of the China Coast: CIA Covert Operations during the Korean*

*War* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1999).

[3] Lilly, *ibid.*

[4] For details on the pickup system, see William Leary, “Robert Fulton’s Skyhook and Operation Coldfeet,” *Studies in Intelligence* 38, no. 1 (Spring 1994), 67–68. The aircraft pickup system in use in 1952 was not, as is sometimes asserted, the Skyhook system developed in the late 1950s by Robert Fulton 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.

[5] CIA’s Far East Division later assessed that the Chinese agent team probably had been caught and doubled immediately after its insertion in July.

[6] See Fecteau’s reminiscences as told to Glenn Rifkin, “My Nineteen Years in a Chinese Prison,” *Yankee Magazine*, November 1982.

[7] Twenty years later, after his return, Fecteau remembered the recognition signal as a flashlight signal; Downey thought it comprised three bonfires. Both were used.

[8] 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 erroneously that Downey and Fecteau came out firing small arms before surrendering. See “The WipeOut 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).

[9] After years of negotiations, the Chinese government in 2002 finally allowed a US Defense Department excavation team into the area, 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.

[10] Internal records make clear that, while the participation of CIA officers on overflights of denied areas was to be minimized, local field commanders were allowed to so decide on their own discretion.

[11]The date of the “presumed dead” finding was exactly a year and a day from the date construed by the cover story for loss of the plane.

[12]Internal records over the decades refer to the “brutal treatment” or the “harsh interrogation techniques” the men were subjected to, but the word “torture” was never used to describe what they endured.

[13]Downey later expressed regret for “every bit of information” he had picked up in the Agency “via shop talk, idle curiosity, etc.”, and he “thanked God for each instance” in which he had minded his own business.

[14]Cell sizes varied, from 5by8 feet to 12by15 feet. The men were moved often enough to disorient and anger them.

[15]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 makes the preposterous claim that CIA would have nothing to do with the men during and immediately after their captivity.

[16]At one point, CIA officers briefly considered a “commando raid” on the Beijing prison to free the men, but there was too little information on their location.

[17]In commenting on a draft of this article, Fecteau expressed his approval for its lack of what he called “hype” and “melodrama.”

[18]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.”

[19]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.

[20]See Abbot Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War* (London: Oxford University Press, 1997), 92– 95.

[21]Downey reports he was caught passing notes only twice in 20 years.

[22]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.

[23] Fecteau liked to joke later that his good health could be attributed to "19 years without booze, broads, or butts."

[24] By mid-1973, CIA's Far East Division (FE) had been renamed the East Asia Division (EA).

[25] Fecteau's Merchant Marine service allowed him to retire before Downey even though the latter had spent more time in CIA service.

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The views, opinions and findings of the author expressed in this article should not be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations or representing the official positions of any component of the United States government.