

Jack Downey
CIA Paramilitary Officer, Prisoner of the People's Republic of China (1952–73), Harvard Law (1975), Connecticut State Judge (1987–97)

Ambassador Donald Gregg

When a great tree in the forest falls, something needs to be said in remembrance.

Jack Downey was one of the tallest among us, in stature and in strength of spirit. I was one of his classmates, not at Yale, but at the Infantry School in Fort Benning, where in 1951 as young CIA officers under alias, we went through jump school, and special courses on sabotage and escape and evasion. We were all drawn to Jack, because of his athletic record, his sense of humor, and his quiet strength. In one exercise we were paired off by size, and told to carry each other on our backs for as far as we could go. I got about 50 feet with Jack aboard, while he carried me effortlessly until told to stop. "I certainly hope I don't have to rely on you to get me off the field if I'm wounded," he said with a grin as he dumped me gently on the ground.

We both wound up in Asia in 1952 with a war raging on the Korean Peninsula. Though we were assigned to different places, we still managed to get together for dinner in Japan just before he went to Korea, where he took off on his ill-fated and ill-conceived mission to drop supplies to an agent team (which had already been captured by the Chinese) and to "air-snatch" an agent off the ground and into the supply plane. Another CIA officer and I had dinner with Jack at a colorful Japanese restaurant, and we both recall it as a festive occasion, as Jack was excited about getting into action. The food was good, the waitresses were pretty, and we all felt that we would live forever.

Jack's plane was shot down. He and Dick Fecteau survived the crash. After a period of interrogation, the two were given a mock trial and convicted. Jack was deemed the "Chief Culprit" and was sentenced to life imprisonment. Dick was found guilty of being the "Assistant Chief Culprit." He drew a 20 year sentence and was released in 1971. Jack would be released two years later, having

spent 20 years and four months in prison trapped like a fly in amber, while my life progressed normally, into marriage and fatherhood. I thought often of Jack during those years and wondered how he was holding up. It was most reassuring to hear his first words as he left prison, entered Hong Kong, and was asked how it felt to be free. He said "I don't mean to sound chauvinistic, but I can't help noticing that skirts are a lot shorter today than when I went to prison." Once a Yalie, always a Yalie.

Shortly after his return home, Jack and I had a chance to talk about his time in captivity. The first two years had been by far the hardest. He said he had not been tortured, but that the interrogations had been endless and severe. As Jack put it "they never forgot anything I said, and I could not keep my lies straight, so in the end I told them what I knew." Things then gradually eased, and he could, as he put it, "focus on keeping myself alive."

Jack and I stayed in close touch over the intervening years. It was a joy to see his life resume and develop magnificently, through marriage, fatherhood and a distinguished legal career. CIA has gone out of its way to honor Jack. CIA historian wrote about Jack and Dick in this journal and CIA made a movie about their experience. (Both are available to the public at cia.gov.)^a Last year Jack and Dick were given CIA's highest honor, awarded only for valor. The two were cheered by a large crowd at CIA headquarters when the director spoke of their heroism and the roles they now play in CIA's history.

My high point with Jack took place at Yale Law School a few years ago, when Dean Harold Koh invited me to speak to a class on CIA and the legal issues it was

a. <https://www.cia.gov/library/video-center/#Z0Mh7EiXRJI> and <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol50no4/two-cia-prisoners-in-china-1952201373.html>

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then tangled up in. I invited Jack to attend the class. He quietly slipped into the room and sat down. When I introduced him, the law students were literally bug-eyed with surprise and appreciation. One of the many things I loved about Jack was his sense of wry amusement about the fact that Yale Law School had turned him down, and that he had gone to Harvard. His acceptance of life as it came at him was astonishing. No complaining, no bitterness, only enduring strength, and a spark of humor that endured more than 7,000 days and nights of imprisonment.

I don't think we shall see his like again.

Donald P. Gregg

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