General Charles “Chuck” G. Boyd

United States Air Force

Chuck Boyd was born April 15, 1938, and died on March 23, 2022. He was 83 years old. It’s been said that the most important dates in a person’s life are the date they are born and the date that they die, as those are dates placed on their tombstone to validate their existence on earth. I disagree. The most important days are all those in between their date of birth and date of death, because it is those days which most accurately reflect the impact their life had on all of us.

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| **Charles G. Boyd** |
| [A person in a military uniform  Description automatically generated](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Charles_G_Boyd.jpg)  Boyd in the 1990s |

Charles “Chuck” Boyd was a four-star general in the United States Air Force. He was a highly decorated combat pilot who served in Vietnam and is the only Vietnam War prisoner of war (1966-1973) to reach the four-star rank (1992). He retired from the Air Force in 1995 and remained active in the national security realm.

Air Force career

Boyd was commissioned as a second lieutenant through the “aviation cadet” program in July 1960. Prior to being ordered to Vietnam he served as a command pilot in several assignments in Europe, the Pacific and the United States, attaining over 2,400 flight hours. Deploying to Vietnam February 1965 he flew the F-100 Super Sabre and F-105 Thunderchief fighter aircraft. While on his 105th mission in Vietnam he was shot down on April 22, 1966. From 1966 to 1973 (2,488 days) he was a prisoner of war and spent time in several North Vietnamese prisons. While in captivity, Boyd was one of 52 Americans forced to participate in the Hanoi March, a propaganda event held in July 1966 in which the U.S. prisoners of war were marched through the streets of Hanoi and brutally beaten by North Vietnamese civilians. Boyd lived adjacent to Navy pilot John McCain for 18 months of his imprisonment. He was finally released on February 12, 1973, as a part of Operation Homecoming.

Chuck Boyd did not speak often about his time as a POW, but did take part in a 2019 oral history interview with the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, where he did speak about the harshness of his captivity and reflected on his survival:

“It was particularly rough going for the first few years. Torture aside, I was colder, hotter and hungrier in North Vietnam than I have ever been in my life. I remember huddling in thin, cotton, pajama-like clothing, and only slightly thicker cotton blankets, with my cellmate trying to share body heat. It’s one thing to get cold then go inside to warm up, and something completely different to stay cold for months on end. I remember lying naked except for shorts on my wooden plank bed, inside a steel roofed cell block, with no windows, covered with heat rash, sweating continuously. When flies would land on me, I would hesitate to brush them off, thus exerting energy which I thought would make me hotter. Hunger was a constant. What food there was ranged from disgusting to barely edible. At times, we received so little that prisoners began to contract acute malnutrition diseases. A period of my life best forgotten.”

Boyd’s actions in combat, which resulted in his being shot down, also resulted in an acknowledgement of his bravery and flying skills, being awarded the Air Force Cross, second only to the Medal of Honor.

**Air Force Cross citation**

Boyd, Charles G.

Captain, U.S. Air Force

421st Tactical Fighter Squadron, 388th Tactical Fighter Wing, Korat Royal Thai Air Base, Thailand

Date of Action: 22 April 1966

“The President of the United States of America, authorized by Title 10, Section 8742, United States Code, takes pleasure in presenting the Air Force Cross to Captain Charles Graham Boyd, United States Air Force, for extraordinary heroism in connection with military operations against an opposing armed force as a combat strike pilot of an F-105D Thunderchief of the 421st Tactical Fighter Squadron, 388th Tactical Fighter Wing, Korat Royal Thai Air Base, Thailand, in action approximately 35 miles northwest of Hanoi, North Vietnam, on 22 April 1966. On that date, Captain Boyd volunteered to participate in a flight with the mission of destroying Surface to Air Missile (SAM) Sites posing a threat to flights striking a bridge in the Phu Tho area. While attacking a hostile SAM site, Captain Boyd saw two missiles streak toward his aircraft. His superb airmanship and instant reaction enabled him to evade the missiles, which burst very near his aircraft. Without hesitation, Captain Boyd continued the attack on the hostile missile site. As he made a second pass through the intense flak which filled the sky around him, Captain Boyd's aircraft received a direct hit by anti-aircraft fire, and he was forced to eject himself in a heavily populated, hostile area. The selfless act of making repeated attacks through intense ground fire after barely avoiding two missiles was far beyond the normal call of duty. Through his extraordinary heroism, superb airmanship, and aggressiveness in the face of hostile forces, Captain Boyd reflected the highest credit upon himself and the United States Air Force.”

After being released as a POW in 1973, Boyd resumed his Air Force career, taking four years to heal up from his injuries, earn a bachelor’s and master’s degree from the Air Force Institute of Technology, and attend the Air War College. Due to malnutrition during his years of captivity, Boyd’s eyesight wasn’t good enough to allow him to resume Air Force flying duties, although he flew private aircraft for many years afterwards.

Over the next 12 years, Boyd rose rapidly through the ranks, holding staff and command assignments in the Pentagon and Europe. From December 1986 until June of 1988, he was vice commander of the 8th Air Force; from 1990-1992 he commanded Air University, and in his last post he was deputy commander-in-chief of U.S. European Command, retiring in August 1995 as a four-star general.

Boyd remained an active voice in national security after his Air Force career, including a stint as a strategy consultant to Rep. Newt Gingrich, Speaker of the House. He later became senior vice president of the Council on Foreign Relations, as its Washington program director.

But, as he saw it, “the defining experience” of his life was the 2,488 days he spent in confinement in North Vietnam, where he was tortured and beaten most of that time. The prolonged malnutrition he suffered in captivity led to vision problems that ended his career as a military aviator. Long after he was released in 1973, he returned to Southeast Asia to retrace his wartime steps and found himself overwhelmed by memories. For years he rarely spoke about his experience as a prisoner, saying he wanted to look forward, not back.

“I made a significant effort in my life, and I think fairly successfully, to put that all behind me,” he told Airman Magazine in 2016. “I’d lost about a fifth of my life at that point,” he added, “and I didn’t want to waste any more feeling sorry for myself or fussing over what otherwise might have been.”

Although vision problems stymied his career as a fighter pilot, Gen. Boyd rode a BMW motorcycle into his late 70s and continued to fly a T-34 Mentor he bought and decorated, the same single-engine aircraft he had first trained on.

When Gen. Boyd finally decided to give up flying for health reasons, he screened several potential buyers for his T-34 airplane and it was purchased by Tim Gause, an Air Force veteran combat pilot. It is one of Tim’s most valuable treasures.

A small airplane parked in a parking lot

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