

Glory Denied

Music by Tom Cipullo

Based on the oral history, *Glory Denied*, by Tom Philpott

Study Guide to the Opera

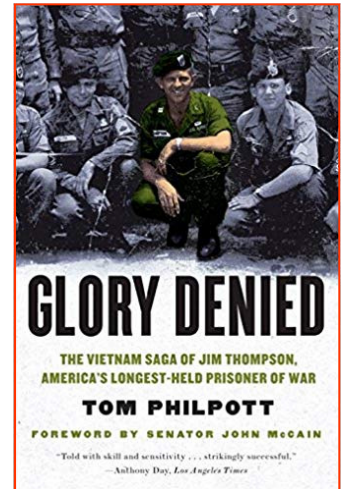
The cast for Syracuse Opera's 2015 production of *Glory Denied*, from left: Ashly Neumann (younger Alyce), Kevin Newell (younger Thompson), Jennifer Goode Cooper (older Alyce), and Gregory Gerbrandt (older Thompson). (Photo courtesy of Syracuse Opera / Douglas Lee Moninger)



Tragedy in the jungle and at home

by Sarah Powell

The Vietnam War (1954–1975) placed the communist government of North Vietnam against the government of South Vietnam and its main ally, the United States. The US introduced active US combat units in 1965 and withdrew troops by 1973. During that time, **Colonel Floyd James “Jim” Thompson** (July 8, 1933–July 16, 2002) was held prisoner for nearly nine years in the jungle camps and mountains of South Vietnam, Laos, and North Vietnam. His story as the longest-held American prisoner of war in US history is told in **Tom Philpott’s** oral history, *Glory Denied: The Vietnam Saga of Jim Thompson, America’s Longest-Held POW*.



Tom Cipullo, an award-winning American composer and librettist, adapted the Vietnam saga of Jim Thompson from the oral history as an opera libretto and composed *Glory Denied* in 2007. *Doing Oral History* author Donald Ritchie defines oral history as the collection of “memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews.” In order to craft the book *Glory Denied*, Philpott utilized conversations, letters, psychiatric records, and unpublished interviews, combining 90 voices to represent the significance of Jim Thompson’s life. Composer Tom Cipullo used four singers to tell the story from the perspective of Jim Thompson and his wife Alyce, as older and younger people before and after his release from captivity.

Jim Thompson’s experiences in the jungle camps were tragic, as well as his return to the United States and home. Imagine how much would have changed in the country and in his family, how much his four children would have grown while he was away. Tragedy and war go hand in hand.

Glory Denied Synopsis

Tableau I *In Captivity*

Colonel Floyd “Jim” Thompson, America’s longest-held prisoner of war (POW), reflects on his years in captivity. He sees himself as a young man and recalls episodes from his nine-year ordeal: his humiliation, torture, solitary confinement, failed escape attempts, and forced propaganda statement. Through it all, he finds the strength to survive in thoughts of his family and his wife, Alyce. He remembers her letters from before his incarceration.

Older Alyce recalls receiving word that Jim’s plane was shot down in Vietnam. Assuming the worst, she begins a relationship with another man and tells her children that their father is dead. Alyce refuses to allow inscription of Jim’s name onto a POW bracelet and consults a lawyer in an effort to have him declared legally dead. Across the world, Thompsons, Younger and Older, find comfort in the 23rd Psalm. Eventually freed, Jim awaits reunion with his wife.

Tableau II *Welcome Home*

Following the release of POWs, Jim returns home; unfortunately, the Pentagon names another man the longest-held POW, depriving Jim of the recognition. Excerpts from the Paris Peace Accords are read, and, in a letter, President Richard Nixon welcomes Jim home, warning, “Some things about America may appear to have changed since your departure.”



Alyce and Jim awkwardly reunite. She confesses what she has done and offers to leave if that is what Jim wishes, only asking that he hear her out first. She describes her loneliness and fear of his death. Jim decides to try for reconciliation. However, he is frantic with the endless changes that have occurred in his absence. Society’s new permissiveness, Alyce’s infidelity, America’s general immorality, and the country’s disdain for its veterans alarm him. It is a bitter “welcome home.” Jim also realizes that Older Alyce is not the woman he left behind. Alyce asserts her independence, no longer the docile, obedient wife she once was. She describes the hell that she too endured in Jim’s absence—the callous behavior of friends and family, the societal hostility, and the malicious treatment at the hands of strangers.

Jim speaks warmly to the congregation at the church where he and Alyce married. Both Thompsons confess that faith in God and the love of a good woman allowed for his survival. Jim tells Alyce he forgives her, but she coldly claims she has done nothing that calls for forgiveness. Younger Alyce reads another touching letter to Jim. The final scene presents Jim alone in his study. He and Alyce have separated indefinitely, and illness has ended his military career. Jim asks himself repeatedly, “What to do today?” He finds consolation in the phrase, “One day at a time,” just as he did while imprisoned. Jim tries to stay positive and confident, but bitter feelings keep intruding. He struggles to forgive, concluding, “Everyone else had a bracelet.”

Adapted from Tom Cipullo for Fort Worth Opera

Characters

Older Jim Thompson

baritone

Jim recalling his life from a distance

Younger Jim Thompson

tenor

Jim as he experiences the events of his life

Older Alyce *soprano*

Jim’s wife, the independent person she has become since his capture

Younger Alyce *soprano*

Jim’s idealization of his wife, a combination of memories and letters written long ago

Vietnam Era POW/MIA Bracelets

In 1970, in an effort to show support for troops while avoiding the turmoil of protests and demonstrations, undergraduates Carol Bates Brown and Kay Hunter created a stunningly popular POW/MIA (Prisoner of War/Missing in Action) awareness campaign through their student organization, Voices In Vital America (VIVA). Brown and Hunter designed simple metal bracelets that bore the name, rank, service, date, and country of a POW/MIA service member.

The inexpensive jewelry reminded the wearer of those suffering in Southeast Asia, bringing further awareness to POW/MIA issues. Wearers were to return their bracelets to the former POW/MIA or relatives upon the individual’s homecoming or the return of remains. VIVA members worked closely with the relatives of POW/MIAs, attending a meeting of the National League of POW/MIA Families and asking permission to use names and information. The campaign distributed nearly five million bracelets by 1976.

American Prisoners of War in Vietnam

by Sarah Powell

During the Vietnam War (1954–1975), more than 700 American service members became North Vietnamese prisoners of war (POW). Though numerous prisoners suffered in previous conflicts, improvements in television and journalism highlighted the struggles of prisoners in the Vietnam era. Essentially political pawns, US POWs appeared on camera with their Viet Cong captors as a form of sophisticated psychology warfare. The Viet Cong (the North Vietnam's National Liberation Front's military) also forced some prisoners, like Jim Thompson, to copy and record false propaganda statements detailing the humane treatment POWs received. However, the Viet Cong did not recognize the Geneva Convention's laws for humane treatment of POWs as they themselves were unprotected by the agreement and considered the US guilty of inhumane military action. Rights in the Geneva accords included the right to fair treatment, to little interrogation, to send and receive mail, and to be in a camp open to inspection by the Red Cross. Instead, American POWs faced solitary confinement (sometimes in the jungle), physical and psychological abuse, torture, and starvation at the hands of the Viet Cong. Prisoners coined dark, humorous nicknames for the camps and jails in North Vietnam—Zoo, Hanoi Hilton, Dirty Bird.



Vietnam POW Stats

- 734 US service members were known POWs
- 684 Former POWs returned alive
- 37 POWs escaped captivity



After the death of North Vietnam's leader Ho Chi Minh in 1969 and the release of a resolution by their Politburo detailing how to treat captured POWs humanely, life in the camps changed drastically. Torture, starvation, solitary confinement, and abuse ebbed. In fact, Jim Thompson received no harsh punishment for his 1971 escape attempt. Meanwhile, the television broadcasts and photographs depicting American POWs galvanized citizens at home, thrusting the POWs into a spotlight that ultimately led to their release and the end of American involvement in Vietnam.

The 1973 Paris Peace Accords freed all remaining American POWs. In his 1974 State of the Union address, Nixon boldly claimed all troops had returned from Southeast Asia. However, in the following decades, many Americans believed American POWs were still trapped in Southeast Asia. This enduring belief, popularized in film and by celebrities, resulted in the formation of a Senate committee on POW/MIA affairs that investigated claims of American POWs in Vietnam. Ultimately, the committee found no compelling evidence that any American remained alive in captivity.

Today, the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) conducts investigations in Vietnam to examine the cases or recover remains of the 1,597 US service members who are classified as Prisoners of War or Missing in Action (POW/MIA) and remain unaccounted for. The majority involve individuals who were killed in action whose bodies have not been recovered or persons who are presumed dead. The DPAA labels many cases non-recoverable, meaning there is conclusive evidence that an individual died, but accounting agencies do not believe remains can be recovered. The DPAA sends recovered remains to an identification lab and returns them to their respective families. DPAA works with Vietnamese veterans and civilians to investigate MIA cases in Laos and Cambodia. The agency also conducted nearly 300 oral history interviews with former and current Vietnamese government and military officials.

Meet the composer and librettist

Composer

Tom Cipullo (1956–) is an award-winning American composer and librettist who has written three song cycles and two operas—*After Life* and *Glory Denied*. He has received many commissions and fellowships from Yaddo, the MacDowell Colony, and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. His upcoming projects include an evening-length opera, *Mayo*, based on the life of Mayo Buckner. Cipullo received his Master's degree in composition from Boston University and his B.S. from Hofstra University, Phi Beta Kappa with highest honors in music. He is a founding member of the Friends & Enemies of New Music, an organization that has presented more than 80 concerts featuring the music of 200 different American composers.



Adapted from tomcipullo.net

Librettist

Tom Philpott (1951–) is a syndicated columnist, freelance writer, and contributing editor at *Military Officer*, who has covered the military for more than 30 years. His weekly news column, "Military Update," reaches two million readers and has appeared daily in US and international newspapers since 1994. He writes monthly for moaa.org and *American Legion Magazine*, regularly contributing to *Military Officer's Magazine*. Philpott's freelance articles have appeared in magazines including *The New Yorker* and *Readers' Digest*. He was a reporter and editor for *Army Times Publishing Co.* from 1977–1993. Philpott, a Pittsburgh native and graduate of St. Vincent College, served a tour in the US Coast Guard as an information officer.



Adapted from militaryupdate.com

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