

Jeremiah Denton says losing wife worse than Vietnam

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Jeremiah Denton survived nearly eight years as a prisoner of war in Vietnam. But the retired Navy admiral and former U.S. senator from Alabama last year encountered something worse: The death of his wife.

"That sent me into a psychological tailspin," Denton said in a phone interview last week. "I just fell apart. I became irritable. I had two more strokes and a heart attack."

Denton was unable to attend the dedication Friday of a plaque in his honor at the Mount Soledad Veterans Memorial in La Jolla, Calif. But he is doing better, he said.

He and his wife, Jane Maury Denton, lived in a home on the Fowl River in South Alabama. The home flooded during Hurricane Katrina and his wife felt her health failing, so they moved to Williamsburg, Va., to be near their children.

"Maury is a huge name up here," Denton said. "She wanted to die up here."

In Virginia, Jane Denton found she needed heart surgery but was told it would be too dangerous because of calcification on the heart, Denton said. Doctors finally decided to try, but the results were poor.

"She was in torture for days, she told me," Denton said. "Finally they morphined her up, and that helped her pain. It was horrible for me."

After three weeks in the hospital, Jane Denton died.

The couple had married on June 6, 1946, right after Denton's graduation from the U.S. Naval Academy.

I had lived with her for 61 years, and we were sweethearts before that," said Denton. "She was the only thing in my life. It's not the same without her.

"It was more traumatic than Vietnam."

Denton said he pulled out of his tailspin about a month ago and began feeling better.

"I had a bunch of health care workers here (at his home) until about two weeks ago," the 84-year-old said. "I dismissed them."

Denton said his weight has dropped from 196 to 149 pounds. He lives alone in a wooded area by a golf course.

"It's fulfilling to do housework, cook my own meals, do my own shopping," he said. "It's a beautiful spot."

Denton said he was touched last year to be included in a two-year traveling exhibit by the National Archives of documents, recordings and films of 25 of the most noteworthy eyewitnesses to American history.

His part is the televised 1966 interview when he was being held as a POW by the North Vietnamese. Then-Navy Commander Denton blinked his eyes in Morse code during the interview, spelling out the word "T-O-R-T-U-R-E."

He also said he wants people to know he is better, back at work on a book and back to helping the Admiral Jeremiah Denton Foundation, which promotes fundamental American values and provides global humanitarian aid.

"It will help my foundation a lot," he said, "if people knew I was resurrected."

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