

## **The Power of Choice – Cold War Patriots’ Day of Remembrance**

The next two installments of the Y-12 history series will be focused on an event held at the Y-12 New Hope Center on October 28, 2011. This facility is provided by the Y-12 National Security Complex to 501 (C) 3 organizations (a damage deposit of \$500 is required) to use for their group meeting purposes.

Reon Schutte spent 12 years and eight months of his life at Chikurubi Maximum Security Prison cell, a windowless six meter (approximately 20 feet) by eight meter space (approximately 26 feet) he was forced to share with 49 other men in Zimbabwe. He faced seven surgeries for cancer and lived to tell his story.

At the Cold War Patriots’ National Day of Remembrance, held in the Y-12 New Hope Center on Friday, October 28, 2011, Reon was a featured speaker. A crowd of retirees from Y-12 and other government sites in Oak Ridge as well as case workers braved the rainy weather to hear him speak...and did they ever get a rich experience!

I was pleased to hear him tell his story the evening before the event at a reception for doctors and nurses in the area who treat those patriots who helped win the Cold War and who now have illnesses as they are growing older. Reon and Maggie Kuhn Jacobus have written a book *The Power of Choice* to be published in December, 2011.

Reon’s story begins with his early childhood when he was born a South African. He spent time in a rough gang as a young boy, then was placed in a military school where he quit when he reached 16 years old to join the military and become a soldier. He enjoyed being a soldier and spent 18 years doing some of the most dangerous assignments.

He was a “behind the border” soldier and was often in enemy territory. Finally he was captured in Zimbabwe and at a military tribunal was sentenced to 26 years in prison. He says that is a life sentence as no one expects a prisoner to live that long.

The Chikurubi prison is known as one of the world’s worst violators of human rights. Reon was given one pair of short pants, a short-sleeved shirt and three (lice infested) blankets. That’s all... When Reon told his story, he paused here to remind the audience that meant no soap, no toothbrush and a small amount of water only once per month.

He was fed a half cup of rice and cabbage a day, was tortured and beaten daily (until suddenly the beatings stopped one day as his fear of them was overcome and that became obvious to those beating him). Reon learned the power of choice to control his mind and to train his thoughts.

At first Reon blamed everyone else for his predicament and resented his nation, the guards and his fellow prison cellmates. He felt hunger at all times and became so intent on food that his only thought constantly was how to get more food. Yet, he sacrificed his one meal routinely to swap it for a pencil and paper to write a letter, give that letter to another prisoner who had an arrangement with a guard that he would smuggle the letter out.

Reon knows of only one of the letters that made it outside. An outdoor magazine printed one of his letters and a young college student read it. The college student said to his parents, “I am going to help that man.” His parents said they did not see how he could make a difference there. He said that he was going to form a support group for Reon, which he did.

One day Reon thought of a newspaper cartoon he had seen in his youth that had a warrior holding up a sword and saying to God, “Why me?,” and a second cartoon that was dark except for a single blurb which said, “Why not?” This caused Reon to begin to think about his thought process and see if he could control it. He tackled the hunger pains first. He looked at the facts. He was surviving on the meager meal once per day and had been doing so for a long time.

So, he decided to stop being hungry. It was not easy, but by concentrating and saying to himself, "you are not hungry" over and over he soon realized he was no longer hungry and was actually surviving on that single meal.

Next he tackled his fear and dread of the beatings that occurred each morning. The men were made to sleep naked with only the blankets and there were so many of them in the cramped space that a row of them would lay down as close to each other as they could get and a second row would sit against the opposite wall. During the night they would swap off so everyone got to lay down for a bit.

Each morning the guards would go through all the cells beating the prisoners and the cell that Reon occupied with 49 others was located so that it took about two hours for the guards to get to his cell. All that time Reon was dreading the beating.

He again trained his mind by using facts. He was surviving the beatings. So, he worked at that thought until he conquered the fear of the beatings. He noticed one day that the guards beat all the other prisoners but skipped him. The beatings stopped all together for Reon and he soon realized that once the fear of the beatings was gone, that was what was tearing him up, not the actual beatings.

We will continue this awe-inspiring story next week.