

Treatment of American Prisoners of War

In Southeast Asia 1961-1973

By John N. Powers

The years 1961 to 1973 are commonly used when studying American POWs during the Vietnam War, even though history books generally refer to the years 1964 to 1973 in defining that war. Americans were captured as early as 1954 and as late as 1975. In these pages the years 1961 to 1973 will be used.

Americans were held prisoner by the North Vietnamese in North Vietnam, the Viet Cong (and their political arm the National Liberation Front) in South Vietnam, and the Pathet Lao in Laos. This article will not discuss those Americans held in Cambodia and China.

The Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO) lists 687 American Prisoners of War who were returned alive by the Vietnamese from 1961 through 1976. Of this number, 72 were returned prior to the release of the bulk of the POWs in Operation Homecoming in 1973. Twelve of these early releases came from North Vietnam. DPMO figures list thirty-six successful escapes, thirty-four of them in South Vietnam and two in Laos.

There were more than those thirty-six escapes, including some from prison camps in Hanoi itself. Some escapes ended in recapture within hours, some individuals were not recaptured for days, and some were simply never seen again. There were individuals who escaped multiple times, in both North and South Vietnam. However, only thirty-six American prisoners of war escaped **and** reached American forces. Of those thirty-six successful attempts, twenty-eight of them escaped within their first month of captivity. Only three successful escapes took place after the prisoners had been held more than a year, each of them in the South. No American POW escaped from North Vietnam and successfully reached friendly forces. Nine American POWs did escape from camps in North Vietnam, four of them from camps in Hanoi. One of the nine escaped twice from camps in North Vietnam.

Some sources say twenty-one POWs held in North Vietnam escaped. That figure seems to include attempts in Laos and Cambodia and the repeated attempts of some POWs while in North Vietnam. All of the men who escaped in North Vietnam were recaptured, usually within the first day. One of them died from the torture which followed his recapture. Two Americans were awarded the Medal of Honor for their escapes and multiple escape attempts before they were finally imprisoned in Hanoi. One survived, one did not.

Of the 687 prisoners who returned alive, twenty four percent were captured in South Vietnam and sixty eight percent were captured in North Vietnam. The remainder were captured in Laos, Cambodia, and China. The majority of the seventy-two early releases, fifty-seven of them, were released in the years 1967 through 1970. Of the 687 returned POWs, one hundred seventeen were enlisted and fifty-six were civilian.

The remaining five hundred fourteen were officers, the large majority of which were pilots.

There were only two Americans rescued from captivity during the entire war. One died shortly after rescue from wounds inflicted by his guards before they ran from the rescue forces. The other rescue took place while the prisoner was being escorted from his point of capture to a prison camp. There were many attempts to rescue American POWs, the most well known being the attack on the camp at Son Tay in North Vietnam. After the war there were cases where prisoners reported they had been within sight and sound of American rescue forces but were prevented by their guards from taking any action. There were about five hundred South Vietnamese soldiers freed in these rescue attempts.

The organization of Prisoners of War from the Vietnam War, NAM-POWs, refers to 661 military POWs and 141 civilian or foreign POWs. Of these, 472 were held in North Vietnam, 263 in South Vietnam, 31 in Laos, 31 in Cambodia, and 5 in China. Some of those POWs held in South Vietnam and some held in Laos were transferred to North Vietnam later in their captivity.

The NAM-POW figures add up to 802, while the DPMO lists 687 returned, 36 escapes, and 37 died in captivity/remains received. That adds up to 760. A report compiled for the American Ex-Prisoner of War organization lists 114 deaths out of 772 confirmed POWs. Total POW numbers compiled by various organizations differ depending on whether or not civilians and foreign prisoners are included in their figures. The issue of how many remain missing and how valid or not those numbers are will not be discussed here.

The information presented here is meant to provide a general review of the conditions American prisoners of war endured in Vietnamese camps. Since it is a general review of the facts, there will be circumstances and conditions which are exceptions to those discussed in these few pages. Conditions and treatment changed from camp to camp and within various sections of individual camps. Conditions and treatment changed from year to year within the prison system as a whole. Explanations involving those kinds of details require entire books.

In August of 1965 the International Committee of the Red Cross asked all combatants in South East Asia to observe the Geneva Conventions concerning treatment of POWs. The United States and South Vietnam agreed to do so. North Vietnam and the Viet Cong did not. With only one exception, Red Cross inspections were not allowed in any POW camps in South East Asia controlled by the North Vietnamese or their allies.

North Vietnam presented the point of view that since no war had been declared, the captives they held were war criminals and not protected under the Geneva Convention. The North Vietnamese stated again and again, that, although the Geneva Convention did not apply, they were treating the war criminals in a humane and lenient manner. The definition of humane and lenient was given to one American POW who had been severely beaten and then forced to remain on his knees for hours, a standard torture technique. His interrogator allowed the POW a five-minute break from this position each hour because of the prisoner's leg infection. The interrogator told the POW this

was in accordance with the humane and lenient treatment policy of the Vietnamese people.

Conditions in South Vietnam

There were some major differences for prisoners held in the South versus those held in the North. Prisoners in the South were typically younger enlisted men. They were kept in smaller groups and had little contact with other Americans. Some POWs in the South went for months, even years, with no contact with another American. When they did have contact, it was with small groups only.

POWs in the South died at a greater rate than prisoners held in the North. Twenty to twenty-five percent (depending on the source) of POWs held in the South died versus five percent of those held in the North. The farther South a POW was held captive the higher the risks to his health. Of the POWs held in the Mekong Delta area, fifty percent did not survive their captivity.

POW camps in the South were usually little more than crude huts or cages. Food and medical supplies were much more limited than what was available in the North. POWs held in the more northern provinces of South Vietnam were more likely to be transferred into North Vietnam at some point, thus improving their chances for survival. One hundred and two American POWs released in Hanoi during Operation Homecoming in 1973 had been captured and held in the South. When they arrived in Northern camps they saw their lives as having been improved. They considered the food to be improved in quantity and quality and the living conditions to be better than what they had experienced in the South. On the other hand, POWs held in the South were more likely to be released. Of the seventy-two early releases during the war, sixty were prisoners held in Southern POW camps.

It was in South Vietnam that the longest held American POW of the war was captured. Army Captain Jim Thompson was captured 26 March 1964. He was moved to North Vietnam in the summer of 1968 and released from Hanoi in Operation Homecoming on 16 March 1973.

Housing

POW camps holding Americans prisoner in the South did not have housing, they had shelter. This shelter was commonly a few simple thatch huts for the guards and bamboo cages for the Americans. The cages were frequently not large enough to allow the prisoner to stand up in and the bed consisted of the bamboo or dirt floor of the cage. At one time or another in their captivity, many prisoners held in the South were kept isolated in a single bamboo cage. If not alone, they were typically kept out of sight and sound of other Americans also held in that camp.

Some prisoners were held in groups of twelve or fifteen. One camp for a group this size consisted of bamboo huts surrounded by a bamboo fence. Inside the enclosure were guard huts, a prisoner hut, and a latrine pit. The prisoners slept on a bamboo

platform about three feet off the ground. Designed for five or six, the platform had to accommodate whatever number of POWs was held there at different times. (Seven of the twenty POWs eventually held there died.) This camp included a classroom used for political lectures. In another camp the prisoners slept in hammocks in cages set below ground level.

Southern camps were typically located in dismal swamps or triple canopy forest. Actual sunlight was so rare prisoners would sit in whatever rays managed to penetrate to the forest floor. The location of the camp itself could be detrimental to the health of the POWs. These camps were open to the elements. Malaria was common in Southern POW camps, as were fungal infections, leeches, snakes, scorpions, centipedes, and ants. One POW described a particular camp in the South as “hideous, muddy, leech and insect-filled”. In the monsoon season the camps would be a sea of mud. With the common problem of dysentery, and people frequently not making it to the latrine pit before a bowel movement, this mud became a sea of filth.

The Camps

The southernmost camps were in the Mekong Delta region and further south in the U Minh forest region. These were located in thick swamps. The conditions of these camps can be seen in the names given to them by the POWs. They called them Mangrove Motel, No-K Corral, Salt Mines, Neverglades, and Mosquito Junction.

Another group of camps was located northwest of Saigon in the area near Tay Ninh along the Cambodian border. These camps were called Sing Sing, Bivouac, Auschwitz, Baffle, Little Stream, Big Stream, and Carefree. Carefree was also called Paradise, but the third name given to it was less tongue-in-cheek - Dachau.

At one point eight American POWs were held in what they called Camp Delta, across the border in Cambodia. They had no shelters and slept chained in hammocks. They were kept thirty feet apart, with the jungle foliage so thick they often could not see one another. After this camp they were moved into a camp they called Monkey Cages. There they spent a year in cages set below ground. Two of them spent a month of that year locked in those cages for punishment.

Farther north from Tay Ninh is the tri-border area where Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam meet. From about July of 1967 to the late fall of 1969 a group of some fourteen POWs was held in two camps in this area. They were called Camp 101 and Camp 102. In November 1969 the prisoners held there were sent to North Vietnam.

Captain Jim Thompson was held in a series of about twelve camps he labeled according to the military phonetic alphabet; Alpha, Bravo, and so on. These camps were in the Khe Sanh area of far northwestern South Vietnam and across the border into Laos. After the Tet Offensive of 1968 prisoners were held for a short period of time near Hue, Da Nang, and Tam Ky until they were moved into North Vietnam.

Treatment

In the very early years of the war, a prisoner held in the South was likely to be treated fairly well and released within a few months. As the war progressed this practice changed. POWs were frequently neglected or mistreated.

At some point the POWs might be given a mat, blanket, and mosquito net. This might occur as soon as they arrived at a camp, or they might be forced to go without for a few days or weeks so they would appreciate the "lenient and humane" treatment of the National Liberation Front.

In one camp no mosquito nets or blankets were made available for the first two years of captivity. In some cases the blankets provided were made from used rice sacks. A crude form of soap was sometimes made available. Small towels would be issued, as would what Westerners called "pajamas", the standard clothing of the region. As these items were used up or worn out they might or might not be replaced. Shoes or boots were commonly taken from the POWs. On more difficult journeys between camps, they might be allowed to use the standard VC sandal, more often they marched in bare feet.

It was not unusual for the prisoners to be tied or shackled while in their cages, especially if being punished. Severe punishment would mean being shackled in the hut or cage twenty-four hours a day for days, made to lie in their own urine and excrement. In these instances their mosquito nets might also be taken away. This treatment, along with beatings, cutting food rations, and neglecting injuries and illnesses, was the torture of the Southern POW camps.

The type of physical torture applied on a regular basis in the North was not found in Southern camps. A prisoner might be beaten for an escape attempt or some other behavior, but more extreme torture was not common in the South. It was not necessary. The severe conditions of the camps; disease, malnutrition, isolation, boredom, even artillery and bombing by US forces, all were used as tools by the VC to get what they wanted from the prisoners. What they wanted were written appeals for the prisoner's release, letters condemning the war, or anti-war statements.

The VC pushed constantly for letters or recordings they could use for propaganda purposes. Seldom was useful military information asked for. POWs were continually lectured to about the correct actions of the National Liberation Front and the in-correct actions of the US. If the POWs could not be used for some sort of propaganda purposes they had little value to their captors.

In their attempts to gain written statements from the prisoners, the guards would require them to publicly criticize other prisoners. Subtle pressures were applied to pit prisoner against prisoner by focusing on race relations in the US and among the prisoners, conduct of lower ranks towards senior NCOs and officers, guard promises of medical care for wounds or illnesses, even offers of better food for better behavior.

It was not often POWs in the South were required to work. Depending on the size of the camp and the availability of food, they might be made to chop wood for cooking

fires, help construct shelters, plant gardens, forage for food, or fish in nearby streams or canals.

POWs were moved from camp to camp during the period of their captivity. A prisoner might be held in six or seven different camps in as many months. At times they would return to an old camp.

A camp might have to be abandoned due to US operations in the vicinity. The prisoner, or prisoners, would be marched to a new location, sometimes helping to build their new camp.

Medical Care

POWs held in the South experienced a range of health problems. Malaria, beriberi, dysentery, scurvy, eczema, osteomalacia, anemia, bleeding gums, gingivitis, lost teeth, edema, and a skin disease which caused severe itching, which led to scratching, which led to infections- all were common. The fungal disease could be so severe as to cover almost the entire body. Osteomalacia is a softening of the bones caused by long-term deficiency of calcium, digestive disorders, and poorly functioning kidneys. These came from the poor diet and lack of sun-light common to Southern camps. Weight loss could be as much as half the prisoner's body weight at capture.

If the POWs were held close to a major VC base camp, they might receive treatment for wounds or illnesses there. Even in those circumstances, wounds were likely to become infected with maggots before any treatment was given.

The one medical doctor captured in the South, a US army captain, was not allowed "...to practice medicine unless a man was 30 minutes away from dying...".

Injuries and illnesses were often used as bargaining tools by the VC. A prisoner would be told treatment would be made available if they demonstrated a cooperative attitude. Prisoners who were very ill or had serious wounds and were considered "resisters" were likely to be killed. It was only in the South that prisoners were executed and those executions publicly acknowledged by the VC. Many other POW deaths were caused by simple neglect on the part of their captors. Wounds and illnesses which did not have to be life threatening were made so by the failure of the VC to take preventive action. It could be argued that this failure was not always purposeful, but simply a fact of life for the VC themselves. POWs did receive rudimentary care when it fit the purposes of their captors. Injections of penicillin or vitamins were common treatments for many medical problems. Sulfa and quinine were at times made available to the POWs. Other times nothing would be provided. Whichever happened seemed to depend as much on the attitude of the guards at the time in question as the availability of the drugs.

Food

The standard menu in the South was rice, two or three cups a day. Since the POW camps were in remote swamps or jungle forests, and since camps had to be moved frequently, rice could not be grown locally. The rice fed to the POWs had been

transported long distances and stored for long periods of time. This meant the rice received by POWs in the South was rotten and full of bugs and rat feces. When supply lines were disrupted the rice ration had to be supplemented with whatever was available. At various times POWs ate elephant, ape, snake, dog, and rat. The guards would add protein to their own meals with chickens, eggs, and pork, when available. At times they would allow some of these items to be included in the POW meals, but not on a regular basis. In one camp the POWs killed the cat kept as a pet by the guards. Before they could eat it they were caught and punished.

The meals would sometimes have greens added to them. These greens would be grown in a small garden in the camp or found on foraging trips around the camp area. POWs would often take part in this foraging. Manioc was searched for and brought back to camp by the armful. Wood to use in cooking fires was also gathered. With the POWs already malnourished, these foraging trips often used more calories than they gained from the food gathered. With no shoes, their feet were easily injured and infections often followed.

In camps with more than a few American POWs, the prisoners cooked their own food. In cases where only a few prisoners were in the camp the guards would prepare all the meals. POWs would be able to see meat and greens added to the guard's meals which did not appear in their own.

When POWs were going to be released, they would be fed better in the days or weeks before. In camps where there were a number of American POWs, a ceremony would be held before the release. At this time there would be available all kinds of meats and sweets, even cans of condensed milk.

At Christmas, the guards might give the prisoners candy. In one case, the prisoners were given one can of condensed milk to share among the entire group of about twelve. This was likely not an example of a cruel joke, but an indication of the lack of food available to even the guards. Starvation was a major factor in deaths of POWs held in the South, either directly or by causing diseases incurred from a weakened immune system.

Mail

Prisoners held in the South might have been able to get a message or letter out of their camp when a fellow POW was released. Beyond that no letters were written and none received.

Red Cross

There were no inspections allowed by the International Committee of the Red Cross. In 1965 the four American POWs held in one camp were given one Red Cross parcel each. This appears to be the only case of Red Cross parcels being distributed.

Conditions in North Vietnam

Americans held prisoner in North Vietnam experienced boredom, discomfort, hunger, and torture over the period of their captivity. Each of these conditions was deliberately imposed on the POWs by their Vietnamese captors. Until 1969 or 1970 the Vietnamese kept the POWs as isolated as possible. They accomplished this isolation by maintaining a number of camps scattered throughout northern Vietnam. Some of them held only ten or fifteen prisoners. There were compounds within camps, all kept separated from each other. Communication of any kind was generally forbidden and severe punishment administered to those who ignored that rule. The Vietnamese wanted every individual prisoner to feel abandoned and alone. Constant pressure was applied on the individual to write or record statements against the war which could be shown to other POWs or printed in Communist or Western publications. If a POW felt alone it was easier for his interrogators to convince the prisoner to give in to their demands for propaganda material. Many prisoners went months, even years, without face to face communication with another American.

During the years 1965 through 1970 sixty-five percent of the POWs entered captivity. Those were also the years of the worst torture, both in frequency and severity. POWs were tortured to obtain information on their units, their fellow pilots, unit tactics, and aircraft capabilities. They were tortured to obtain "confessions" of their crimes in bombing schools and hospitals. They were tortured to obtain statements against the war. They were tortured for communicating with their fellow POWs. They were tortured to force them to meet with peace delegates. They were tortured for not acting as directed by their captors during those meetings. They were tortured for refusing to display the "correct attitude" towards their captors.

After 1970 some changes took place. The Vietnamese seemed to ease up (but not completely abandon) their practice of torture and improved the food and living conditions somewhat. Three events are seen as catalysts for these changes. In late 1969 Ho Chi Minh died and three POWs were released by the North Vietnamese. For the first time, the released POWs talked publicly about their treatment as prisoners, especially the torture. The North Vietnamese felt world opinion turning against them and apparently used Ho's death as their excuse to try to regain their status as less of an aggressor and more of a victim.

The third event took place late in 1970. In November of that year a force of about 130 Americans penetrated to within twenty-five miles of Hanoi, landed on North Vietnamese soil, and assaulted the prisoner of war camp at Son Tay. They were prepared to rescue and return to US control about seventy American POWs. They found none. Within days of that raid the Vietnamese were moving most of their prisoners into camps within Hanoi. This required housing the POWs together in large groups, something they had tried to avoid prior to that time. Some POWs went from having no cell mate or one cell mate to having twenty or thirty. POWs met face to face for the first time with fellow prisoners they had been communicating with by code for years.

By the last half of 1972 the Vietnamese knew the war was almost over. Food and medical care improved and more physical activity was allowed. The prisoners were

being fattened up to show the world how well they had been treated under the humane and lenient policies of the North Vietnamese.

Housing

Three types of cells were common. A two man cell contained two beds and measured about seven feet by seven feet. The beds were wooden pallets or cement platforms raised about eighteen inches off the floor. In some cells were wooden or iron ankle stocks. Normally, the only other piece of furniture was a latrine bucket. There was a two foot wide aisle between the bunks. A small wattage light bulb might remain on twenty-four hours a day. The cells typically had high walls with small windows or vent holes at the top. This meant very little air movement.

The second type of cell was larger. It would hold eight or twenty or even forty prisoners. Some of these measured twenty by forty five feet. A raised concrete sleeping platform, again about eighteen inches high, was in the center of the cell with about a two and a half foot space around it. If there was room, all the prisoners slept on the platform. If not, some slept in the walk space.

The third type of cell was the single cell used for punishment or in which the senior officers and the hard line resisters were isolated.

These were only the standard cells. There were frequent variations of each type. Common to almost any cell were the very large rats, mice, cockroaches, mosquitoes, lack of air movement, heat of 120 degrees or more in the summer, and cold as low as 40 or 50 degrees in the winter.

There were fourteen established POW camps in North Vietnam. (A CIA study claimed nineteen known camps. It is not obvious whether they were referring only to camps in North Vietnam.) Twelve of the fourteen were in or near Hanoi. Many of them were known by more than one name. These other names usually resulted from references to sections within a prison compound. The most well known, the Hanoi Hilton, had fifteen sections within its walls, each referred to by a separate name. Some of these prison camps also held South Vietnamese and Laotian military prisoners and North Vietnamese civilians, including children. Some of the prisons had been built by the French, others were buildings modified to hold American POWs.

It was common for American POWs to be taken to the Hanoi Hilton when they were first captured. They would be questioned and later sent to Briarpatch or the Zoo. Later they might be returned to the Hilton. Frequent transfers to other camps or to compounds within the same camp were normal. After arriving at a prison camp for the first time, POWs would often receive a standard issue of supplies. This consisted of a set of striped pajamas, underwear, sandals, a cotton blanket or two, mosquito net, toothbrush, water jug, cup, soap, three pieces of toilet paper of paper bag consistency, a straw mat, and a waste bucket. These supplies might all be issued at once, not issued until later, or only some of them issued. At times some of these items were removed as a form of punishment.

Alcatraz was a very small compound in Hanoi. It was thought to be the worst of the prisons. Eleven POWs considered hard line resisters were kept here for two years starting in October of 1967. Originally built by the French, Alcatraz had tiny cells which were underground. The walls were earth and there were no windows. This meant very little ventilation. The tin roof of the cells collected heat in the summer and cold in the winter. During storms the cells would have water flowing through. POWs were kept in heavy ankle shackles well over half of each day, including while they slept. Each prisoner was kept isolated from the others. Talking was not allowed and the guards attempted to prevent prisoners even from seeing another American. All eleven POWs were tortured. One American was so weakened by treatment here he died. The remainder were transferred back to the Hanoi Hilton at the end of 1969.

Briarpatch was thirty five miles west of Hanoi. The camp had no running water and no electricity. The prisoner's diet was very poor and many of them suffered from malnutrition. Briarpatch was opened in September 1965, closed after three weeks, opened again in December 1965, closed in February 1967, and used one last time for the first half of 1971. At that time it held POWs who were captured outside of North Vietnam.

Treatment at Briarpatch was harsh. Severe beatings and use of torture cuffs and torture ropes were common. Deep holes were dug in each cell for use as a bomb shelter. These holes were then used as punishment cells, some of the POWs forced to remain in them for a month with their hands cuffed behind them. After the transfer of some of the guard personnel, conditions at Briarpatch improved shortly before it was closed down in early 1967.

Dirty Bird was near a power plant in Hanoi. It was opened in June 1967 and pains taken to make sure the US government knew American POWs were held there. The first prisoners were held in a section of eight larger than normal cells. The condition of these cells led to the name of the camp. Coal dust from the plant was everywhere. The cells had no windows so ventilation was minimal. Prisoners were kept shackled most of the time, the food was terrible and the cells uncomfortable, but there was no torture. In July another eight cells were opened in a building nearby. This camp had a number of names: Army Post, Dirty Bird Annex, Dirty Bird West, Doghouse, Foundry, and Power Plant. In August another camp with seven cells opened nearby. This was called The School or Trolley Tracks.

All three camps were closed down in October 1967.

Dogpatch was only about ten miles from the Chinese border. It was opened in May 1972 and closed January 1973. Each cell held ten to twenty prisoners. The walls and ceiling were thick stone and concrete and the windows were narrow slits. There was no electricity. Prisoners were allowed to have fires in the cells to ward off the cold.

Faith, also called Dan Hoi, was nine miles west of Hanoi. It was opened in July 1970 and closed that same November. Six separate compounds contained rooms with individual beds. Each cell held anywhere from eight to twenty POWs. Prisoners were allowed out of their cells to mingle. Food was much better than at other prisons, as was medical treatment. Fruit was a regular part of the menu. Guards were for the most

part more relaxed. The requirement of bowing to guards was dropped. Many prisoners received mail. Prisoners played cards and set up classes in a variety of subjects. The camp was closed after the 21 November 1970 raid on the nearby Son Tay camp. All of the prisoners at Son Tay had been transferred to Faith four months before the raid.

Farnsworth, sometimes called D-1, was about twenty miles southwest of Hanoi. It was opened in August 1968 and held prisoners captured outside North Vietnam. The rooms had no windows and the prisoners were not often allowed out of the rooms. Treatment by the guards was generally brutal. Farnsworth was also closed down after the Son Tay raid.

The well known Hanoi Hilton was in central Hanoi. POWs were held here from August 1964 through March 1973. The Hilton was actually a French prison built at the beginning of the 20th century. Surrounding it were twenty foot high concrete walls. The walls had broken glass and electric wire on top. There were also guard towers. Within the walls of the Hanoi Hilton were compounds known as Heartbreak Hotel, Little Vegas, New Guy Village, and Camp Unity. Within the Little Vegas compound were sections, sometimes just a single cell, known as the Cave, Desert Inn, Golden Nugget, the Mint, Riviera, Snake Pit, Stardust, and Thunderbird. Temperature in the cells during the summer reached 120 degrees. The cells were specially equipped for torture. The cells at Heartbreak Hotel were described as closets. Higher ranking POWs and others considered resisters were held in the Vegas cells. All POWs on the official list of those captured in North Vietnam were moved to the Hanoi Hilton after the Son Tay raid. Especially in the early years of their captivity, POWs were likely to undergo repeated torture sessions at the Hilton. The Meathook Room at the Hilton was so named because of the hook on the ceiling. Prisoners were tied into various painful positions and hung from this hook. The Knobby Room was designed to muffle the screams of POWs being tortured.

Hope, more commonly known as Son Tay, was twenty miles northwest of Hanoi. It was opened in May 1968 because of the lack of space in camps in Hanoi. The most Hope ever held was 55 POWs. The cells were filthy with no ventilation, rats were everywhere, and the food was terrible. Sections of the small camp were known as the Beer Hall, the Cat House, the Opium Den, and the Stag Bar. Prisoners were kept in group cells. Some torture was carried out by the guards, but the majority of the POWs were not tortured. Towards the end of 1969 treatment and conditions improved at Son Tay. The camp was closed in July 1970.

Mountain Camp, also called K-49, was in the mountains about fifty miles north of Hanoi. Each cell contained a table, stool, toilet, and bed with a straw mattress. Despite the better facilities, isolation was the rule at Mountain Camp. This camp was occupied from the end of 1971 until January 1973, when the prisoners were transferred to Hanoi for Operation Homecoming.

Plantation was opened in June 1967 and held prisoners until March 1973. Part of this camp was used as a showcase camp for visiting peace delegations. A few cells were maintained just for that purpose. Plantation was also known as the Citadel, the Country Club, Funny Farm, and Holiday Inn. Sections within the prison compound were called the Big House, Warehouse, Gunshed, Corncrib, and the Movie House. The three

cells set aside for visiting delegations were called the Show Room. Conditions overall were much the same as at other prisons.

Portholes, or Bao Cao, was near the coast of North Vietnam in the northern part of the panhandle, in the area of Vinh. Within the camp civilian POWs were held in cells called Duc's Camp, enlisted prisoners in the cells called Minh's Camp, and officers in a third section. The buildings were about thirty feet long with small individual cells. Each cell had wooden leg stocks and nothing more. Prisoners slept on thin mats on the wooden floor. Some of the cells were dug below ground. The camp name came from the round holes cut into the doors to allow ventilation. Many prisoners referred to this camp as Bao Cao, the phrase the guards insisted the prisoners use as a sign of respect. The camp opened in the summer of 1967 and was closed in late summer 1968.

Rockpile was thirty miles south of Hanoi. It was also known as Camp B and Stonewall. Rockpile held prisoners from June 1971 to February 1973. It had large rooms and a dining room. Only about fifteen prisoners were kept here.

Skidrow, also called Camp Hughey and K-77, was six miles southwest of Hanoi. It was named for the dirty and rundown condition of the buildings. Prisoners were held here from July 1968 through January 1972. POWs who would not cooperate at the Hanoi Hilton were sent to Skidrow. POWs captured in South Vietnam and Laos were also held here for a time. The cells were small, painted black, and without windows. The food was better than what the POWs captured in the South had experienced, yet POWs transferred from Hanoi considered the food to be inadequate compared to what they had been eating.

The Zoo was on the outskirts of Hanoi in an old French film studio. Various buildings within the compound were called the Auditorium, Barn, Chicken Coop, the Garage, and the Stable. At times torture was common at the Zoo. Punishment cells were dark, had no air movement, and likely to be crawling with maggots. Prisoners were kept in these cells for as long as three weeks. During that time they were likely to be left with no mosquito net, ankles in stocks, and hands tied behind their backs. The POWs might be released once a day to clean their waste bucket, or they might be kept tied and in stocks for days at a time. Food was bad at the Zoo and the drinking water dirty. Guards constantly inspected cells and beat the prisoners.

The Zoo Annex was within the walls of the Zoo compound but considered a separate camp. Cells held as many as nine POWs. Junior officers were held here.

Treatment

If there was a typical day for an American prisoner of war in North Vietnam it might have started with a gong at 5 or 5:30 am. At 6 Hanoi Hannah and the program the Voice of Vietnam were broadcast over the camp speakers. Sometime in the morning a prisoner would be allowed to take out their latrine bucket to empty and clean it. This was done on a schedule meant to keep POWs from seeing each other. The first meal was issued about 10 am, the second about 4:30 pm. There was no third meal. A gong sounded about 9 pm as a signal to go to bed. A bath might be allowed, unless the prisoner was being punished, there was a water shortage, it was too cold, or for any

other reason the guards might have. A bath could mean washing with a rag and a bucket or standing under water flowing from a pipe in the wall. Bathing only once every couple of weeks was common. The Voice of Vietnam was broadcast again in the evening.

Some POWs would exercise by doing pushups or pacing the 2 or 3 steps to the end of their cell and back again. They would calculate how many steps back and forth would equal a mile. Some of them walked a mile or more on many days.

Normally, except to empty their waste bucket and to wash, prisoners were kept in their cells. In some cases prisoners were required to sit on their sleeping board or platform until the gong signaled go to bed. In some cells in some camps a small wattage light bulb remained on twenty-four hours a day.

All of this describes what was a normal day for many POWs under normal circumstances. Normal was frequently interrupted. An example of an interruption to normal would be the two POWs in one cell who were punished for not cooperating with interrogators. For ten weeks they were issued no toilet paper, no soap, no toothpaste, allowed only one bath a week, and given one pint of water per day for the two of them. There were many such interruptions in the life of an American POW in North Vietnam.

Senior ranking POWs were commonly kept isolated from other prisoners. They were usually housed in single cells and communicated only through various codes with other POWs. There were men in this group who spent four or five years in almost complete isolation. To combat the hours, days, and years of solitary confinement, men built imaginary houses, studied insects, recalled complex math formulas, or planned extravagant meals.

After the November 1970 Son Tay raid the POWs were moved to the prisons in Hanoi. From that point on few POWs were isolated. Most were housed in group cells. In some cases they were allowed more freedom of movement at least within their compound.

Torture

Any discussion of the treatment of American POWs during the Vietnam War has to look at the issue of torture. On their return in 1973 some POWs estimated that ninety-five percent of them had been tortured at some time. Others felt that up through 1969 ninety-five percent of them had been tortured. Torture varied in degree and duration.

Locking prisoners in ankle stocks or leg irons was very common. This might be continued for four or five days during which time the POW would never be released from the stocks. That meant urinating and defecating on their sleeping platform and themselves. It was common during this four or five day period not to be given any food or water, which helped keep down the mess (although weakness from starvation was the intended effect). If further punishment was to be given the POW would be fed bread and water once a day after the initial period of starvation. Release from the stocks might come periodically to use the waste bucket or to be interrogated. There were POWs who endured weeks and even months of this treatment. When kept in ankle stocks for longer periods of time they might be allowed out of the stocks for 10

minutes out of each 24 hour day to clean their waste bucket. One POW was given eighty-five days in leg irons as punishment.

The next step would often be beatings by the guards. They would enter the cell individually or in groups and punch and kick the prisoner. Ribs, teeth, and noses were often broken in these beatings. Sometimes clubs, rifle butts, or rifle cleaning rods were used. Flogging was practiced by some guards. They used light bamboo rods or rubber whips cut from old tires. There are accounts of POWs receiving 300 blows from such a rubber whip in one session.

Beatings were part of the common practice of sleep deprivation. If this took place in a torture room the prisoner would be forced to sit on a stool or cement block about eight inches high. This position was designed to be physically uncomfortable. They would be punched and screamed at every half hour or so to keep them awake or if they fell off the stool. They would not even be allowed to leave the stool for bowel movements. This would continue for four or five days until the prisoner agreed to the guard's demands.

If the sleep deprivation took place while the prisoner was in his cell he would be forced to stand and bow every time a guard entered the cell. Guards would come into the cell several times an hour. If the POW did not rise and bow he was punched and kicked. Sleep deprivation was used as punishment or in an attempt to get the prisoner to write propaganda statements.

Complete isolation was another common treatment. The extreme form of this was to place a prisoner in a completely darkened cell. Ensuring the cell was dark also meant there was no air circulation. The prisoner's clothing and/or his mosquito net might be removed. The cell was usually not cleaned after the last prisoner had been there. Rats, bugs, and spiders abounded in these cells. There would be nothing in the room except for a waste bucket. At times even this was removed. Food and water were limited. If there was a waste bucket the prisoner might be allowed to empty it once a day - or not. In some cases the prisoner's hands would be tied behind his back and his ankles tied or put in cuffs. Again, this could, and did, go on for weeks.

If the prisoner was not cooperating by this time torture cuffs would be applied to their wrists. These were steel cuffs or manacles. The cuffs were locked by a key wrench. As long as the key was turned the cuffs were ratcheted down smaller and smaller, causing instant and severe pain. They could be, and usually were, tightened right down to the bone. This would cause tearing and cutting of the wrists and quickly cut off the flow of blood to the hands. The hands would swell up and turn black.

The torture cuffs would be applied and the prisoner locked into the ankle stocks on his sleeping platform. With his arms cuffed behind him and ankles in stocks, the prisoner could not lay back down to sleep. He would have to remain upright, legs straight out before him. If he went to sleep and fell back on his arms the pain from the cuffs woke him or the guards would come into the cell and beat him. The weight loss of the POWs meant little or no body fat, including their buttocks. Being forced into this position for long periods of time caused huge sores. To further complicate the matter, the prisoner would not be released to use his waste bucket. Some POWs remained in

torture cuffs for more than a month. The cuffs might be removed twice a day to eat and use the waste bucket.

The torture cuffs were frequently combined with the ropes treatment described below.

Being put into the ropes was one of the worst of the torture techniques used by the Vietnamese. A prisoner would have his ankles tied together and wrists tied or cuffed behind his back. His arms would then be tied together so they were touching from the elbows to the wrists. The method used to tie the arms together also shut off circulation in the arms and hands.

At this point a rope might be passed from the wrists to a hook or beam in the ceiling and the prisoner hoisted off the floor. Done in a violent enough motion this would break the arms or dislocate the shoulders. The prisoner might be stood on a chair with the rope leading to a beam and the chair kicked out from under him. Instead of tying the hands with ropes the torture cuffs might be used in this process.

Another variation would be to place the prisoner's feet in ankle stocks, pass a rope from the wrists behind the back up over the head to the ankles and pull the prisoner forward until their face was against their legs. POWs told of being forced into this position until their nose was pressing against their anus.

The position was also reversed. Placing the prisoner on his stomach, the guards would run a rope from the ankles to the prisoner's neck and pull them into a bow.

Another variation was to place the prisoner on his sleeping platform face down. The ankle stocks would be put in place, a rope passed from the wrists or elbows to a beam or hook, and the prisoner lifted off the sleeping platform by the rope. Their feet were held in the stocks and the rest of their body was suspended in the air.

POWs with broken arms or legs were put into the ropes. Guards would twist or punch the broken limb while the prisoner was held in position. Some of the guards were very adept at relieving the pain just before a prisoner was about to pass out. Then they would continue. When the prisoner screamed a rag would be stuffed in their mouth. The rags were never clean. Since clubs and rifle barrels were often used to do this many prisoners had teeth broken in the process.

At first ropes were used for this torture. The ropes left very visible scars so the Vietnamese switched to webbing. The webbing straps would be carefully applied over shirt sleeves or pant legs so scars would be minimized. While tying the arms the torturer would actually stand on the prisoner's back to gain leverage in forcing the elbows and shoulders together. Sooner or later the ropes broke the will of any prisoner they were applied to. Usually the prisoner could not immediately write whatever statement the Vietnamese wanted because their hands and arms were swollen and numb. Especially from 1965 through 1969 there were POWs who were repeatedly subjected to the ropes treatment.

Torture was used by the North Vietnamese for a number of purposes. They wanted statements from pilots they could use in their propaganda efforts against the United

States. They tortured pilots to admit they bombed hospitals and schools or to produce statements against the war. They tortured prisoners to find how they were communicating between their cells and who they were communicating with. They tortured prisoners to find who the leaders were, to determine who was giving orders. They tortured prisoners who would not supply whatever information the interrogators were looking for. Many POWs were tortured in the summer of 1969 after two prisoners escaped from the Zoo Annex in Hanoi and were recaptured the next day. The most severe torture was experienced by those POWs who resisted all questioning and who attempted to provide leadership to their fellow captives. There were American POWs tortured to their death.

Communication

The Vietnamese tried hard to prevent their American prisoners from communicating with one another. If they could keep the POWs isolated they had a better chance of obtaining written statements or recordings they could use for propaganda purposes. The American POWs developed various methods of communicating between cells, between separate compounds within camps, and between separate camps. There was even some communication back and forth between some of the prisoners and Washington, D.C.

The best known method of communicating was the tap code. The letter K was dropped from the alphabet and the remaining 25 letters arranged in a 5 by 5 grid. The first series of taps gave the line across and the second series the line down. Three taps followed by two taps meant the letter M. The letter C took the place of K. The tap code was helped by using abbreviations. GBU meant God Bless You. The code was most commonly used to tap on the walls between cells. It could also be sent using a broom, sneezing, coughing and shuffling feet. Holes could be poked in paper using the code and left where other POWs would find it.

The code was brought to Vietnam by a pilot who had attended a survival course where the instructor mentioned the method.* The instructor had learned it from the British while a POW during World War II. He was not allowed to teach the code in classes as it was not part of the set curriculum. He mentioned it in class and some students asked questions during a coffee break. One of them remembered it when he was captured in the summer of 1965.

The tap code could also be used by flashing numbers using fingers. At times POWs could see each other by looking under the door. Other times they dumped water under their cell door so other prisoners could see their signals in the puddle's reflection. They also developed a method of shaping their hands into letters and symbols.

Written notes could be passed if some sort of paper and writing tools were available. These notes could be passed by hiding them in a bowl of rice when a prisoner was allowed to pick up his meal. Notes could be left in common areas such as a bath house or the tank where waste buckets were emptied. At times POWs were allowed to wash their clothing. They could put notes into pockets of other clothing hanging to dry. Messages were scratched on the bottom of food bowls. The POWs developed a code of

arm and hand movements. Brushing the left arm with the right hand, wiping the brow with the left hand, scratching the head - all had meanings.

Prisoners would pretend to be talking to a guard who spoke some English. They would use pig-Latin and actually be talking for the benefit of other POWs. A prisoner would pretend to be trying to talk to a guard who spoke no English. In reality he would be passing information to those prisoners in near-by cells.

At times the POWs could actually talk to each other. This was sometimes possible in the early afternoon when the guards typically rested. Prisoners could put their drinking cup against the wall and talk to the next cell. A loud cough or thump on the wall ended all conversation or tapping. In some cases prisoners actually bored holes through the wall to the next cell. When they were caught in these activities they were at times severely punished, especially prior to 1970.

Some POWs managed to get messages out in letters they were allowed to write to their families. Coded messages were some times received in letters from home. The idea for the raid on Son Tay evidently originated from the camp itself. Some of the POWs requested a rescue force. In another case an escape attempt was coordinated with US forces but the attempt called off by the senior ranking POW.

When forced to record statements which were to be broadcast to other POWs, prisoners would refer to "Horse Shit Minh" to let their fellow POWs they were being coerced.

One of the most famous examples of prisoners communicating occurred when a POW blinked out the word "torture" while being filmed for propaganda purposes and the film was shown in the West. Another was a group photo of American POWs which had every one of them giving the photographer the finger. The Vietnamese referred to the American POWs as Yankees. But apparently they had never heard of Yankee ingenuity.

**Editor's note: The instructor was Claude Watkins, WWII POW.*

Medical Care

Medical care provided to the POWs was minimal and often withheld for long periods of time as a means of persuasion. It is very probable that many of those prisoners that did not return died from injuries and illnesses the Vietnamese did not or could not treat. There were cases of seriously injured POWs being sent to civilian hospitals in Hanoi for treatment. There were more cases of POWs in need of such treatment never receiving it.

Although medical care, when made available, was outdated and crude by standards the POWs were accustomed to, most of the time it was the same care as available to the Vietnamese themselves. The difference was that care was frequently and deliberately withheld and injuries often further aggravated as a means of torture.

Food

In the first year or so of Americans being held prisoner in North Vietnam they were fed three meals a day consisting of sliced bread, meat, and vegetables. Even so, some of the first POWs had meals so poor-chicken heads and rotten fish-they became sick and quickly lost weight. From 1965 through 1970 the prisoners typically received two meals a day, the first about 10 am and the second about 4 pm. Meals included a bowl of watery soup made from the vegetable of the season-pumpkin, turnip, kohlrabi, or squash. A second bowl consisted of whatever vegetable the soup was made from fried in fat. Last was a bowl of poor quality rice which often included gravel and grit. Some days however, a meal consisted only of a handful of rice and a bowl of warm water. Many POWs formed the habit of swallowing the rice without chewing it to prevent damage to their teeth. When a prisoner was being punished or the guards were in a bad mood the vegetables would not be washed of the human excrement applied in the fields. Dirt would be deliberately thrown on the food. The bowls of food would be left just outside the door of the cell to get cold and allow rats to help themselves. Prisoners told of setting down the moldy bread while they ate their soup only to have rats nibbling on it when they reached for it again. New prisoners often thought they were eating rye bread until they found the dark flecks were bugs or rat feces. It was not uncommon for the soup to contain pig feet, chicken heads, rotten fish, or chunks of fat with hide and hair attached.

Prisoners scheduled for early release would be fed three times a day with food of increased quantity and quality, including fresh bread. They were also allowed out of their cell so the sun would darken their obvious prison skin tone. All part of the humane and lenient treatment of the North Vietnamese people.

Special meals which included fruit and candy were commonly provided three or four times a year for holidays. It was also common for the Vietnamese to film the POWs eating those meals, usually in groups. There was no filming of meals the prisoners ate in their cells the remainder of the year.

In 1970 meals generally began to improve. A third meal was given to the POWs, usually a breakfast of toast and perhaps a small amount of milk. The quality of the soup improved with the addition of noodles and better vegetables. By 1972 food from packages was made available. This included vitamins, condensed milk, and fruit. These packages were either from the Red Cross or packages sent by relatives but never delivered. The day before release in March 1973 some POWs were fed turkey. The guards served the prisoners and ate with them. The guards evidently hoped the prisoners had short memories.

Mail

The first American held in North Vietnam was allowed to write two letters a week and received mail frequently. That practice ended as more POWs were captured.

Typically, a prisoner might be allowed to write a letter about a year after he was first captured and might be given a letter some time in his second year of captivity. Letter writing was a privilege given to a POW which had to be earned. Earning the privilege

meant writing some kind of propaganda statement, often after being tortured for refusing to write that statement. Allowing a prisoner to write and giving a prisoner his mail from home were acts planned to benefit the Vietnamese. It was either a reward or a punishment. A prisoner might be given a letter at Christmas time with family photographs or news of a family death. The hope was that an already depressed POW would be that much more open to suggestions that better treatment was available if only they would write a statement. A letter might be shown to a POW but not actually given to him until he demonstrated a "correct attitude".

If there was an average number for letters received by POWs it was probably two per year. Letters given to prisoners were commonly months old. Prior to 1970 some prisoners were never allowed to write or receive mail. Of about 500 packages sent to the POWs during two early Christmas seasons, none were given to any prisoners and almost all were returned to the senders. In 1971 and 1972 prisoners were more likely to receive mail. Just before they were released in 1973 some prisoners received as many as 20 or 30 letters, some of them which had been written as many as six years before. After their release, some POWs felt those most likely to be allowed to write and receive mail were those prisoners whose names were known to U.S. officials. A prisoner listed only as MIA was likely to be allowed no mail privileges. Again, the death of Ho Chi Minh seemed to mark a general improvement in treatment of POWs. After 1969 many prisoners received mail on a more regular basis. Still, when released in 1973, ninety-five POWs had never received a letter from home and eighty had never written a letter that was actually mailed by the Vietnamese.

Conditions in Laos

Prisoners of war held in Laos had three chances to survive. They could escape (3), they could be released early by their captors (28), or they could be sent on to camps in North Vietnam (10). Individuals not in one of these three categories simply disappeared. Only ten POWs captured in Laos were returned alive in 1973, and these were the ten sent to camps in North Vietnam (nine were American and one Canadian).

Perhaps the only Red Cross visit of the war occurred in Laos in 1961. Eight Americans had been captured in early 1961 and held under miserable conditions for a year and a half. Only four survived. At one point they were staked all night on their back in the rain. Being placed in a cell did little to improve their condition. Their food was rice and weeds. They were kept in a dark cell except for a morning bath in a stream. While bathing they would pick leaves to eat. The guards were cruel and abusive. They would shoot into the cell for fun. One American was killed when he refused to obey the guards. Six POWs were locked side-by-side in heavy ankle stocks for twelve hours at a time. They were transferred to a different prison for the Red Cross visit. During those few days they were housed in clean, sunlit cells with no stocks. They were given blankets and fed well. When the Red Cross inspection team left the POWs were sent right back to the camp with the stocks and darkened cells. By the time of their release one American had been killed, one starved to death and two others simply never seen again.

Three more Americans were known to have been captured between 1963 and 1966. Within a few days of his capture one POW was tied upside down to a tree and beaten, dragged behind a water buffalo, and had an ant's nest jammed on his head. Again, guards shot at the prisoners for entertainment. Food and water were scarce. All three eventually escaped, but only one made it back alive. A fourth American captured in 1964 successfully escaped after three months.

One prisoner captured in Laos was kept in various bamboo cages for three years. His hands and feet were tied and a rope fixed around his neck and to a stake outside the cage. During the day his hands and feet were freed and some slack allowed in the neck rope. The cage was not large enough for him to stand. He was allowed out twice a day to use the latrine. About every six weeks he was allowed to bathe and wash his clothes. His food was mostly rice. Tied as he was at night he could do little to escape the rats that crawled over him looking for food and the snakes looking for the rats.

After one escape attempt his legs and neck were placed in stocks in his cage. Another escape attempt got him buried up to his neck for a week. Some guards treated him well, even providing him with necessary medicine for various fungus problems. Other guards allowed him to almost die from neglect. This prisoner was allowed to write one letter in that three year period in Laos but the letter was never sent.

Of the over 300 American POWs missing in Laos only nine returned in Operation Homecoming in 1973. These nine had been sent from Laos to POW camps in North Vietnam. They called themselves the Lulus - Legendary Union of Laotian Unfortunates. The whole time they were in North Vietnam they were kept separate from other American POWs and were never allowed to write letters.

The Vietnamese used the Geneva Convention as their excuse for treatment given to American prisoners of war. Since no war had been declared they were not bound by the Geneva Convention. No declaration of war meant no prisoners of war. Their American captives were referred to as criminals.

Yet, by their own actions, they demonstrated their treatment of the POWs was wrong and they knew it. Prisoners were threatened before interviews with peace delegates not to mention how poorly they were treated. Those prisoners being released early were told if they talked about their treatment the Vietnamese would release to the public the anti-war statements the prisoners had signed under torture. POWs being released early and all the POWs at Operation Homecoming were deliberately fattened up before release with much better food. In the months before their release they received medical care few of them had experienced during their captivity before that time. The Vietnamese kept show camps where visitors were allowed to observe healthy looking prisoners performing every day tasks. Films were produced showing prisoners relaxing in groups or playing volleyball. At times they failed to cut all the scenes which showed the guards in the background threatening those prisoners. The Vietnamese "humane and lenient treatment" of the POWs was a sham and they knew it.

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Those seriously interested in reading more about American POWs in Vietnam should read at least two books. [P.O.W., A Definitive History of the American Prisoner-of-War Experience in Vietnam](#) (666 pages) gives detailed individual accounts of captivity and treatment. [Honor Bound](#) (706 pages) gives an excellent view of the overall experience of American POWs in Vietnam.

Manufacturers, suppliers and others provide what you see here, and we have not verified it. See our disclaimer. Offers an account of what happened to nearly eight hundred Americans captured in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War Honor Bound: American Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia, 1961-1973. Customer Reviews. Write a review. Honor Bound: The History of American Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia 1961-1973. The Long Road Home: U.S. Prisoner of War Policy and Planning in Southeast Asia. Synopsis. Full Volume. Synopsis. Full Volume. Rochester, Kiley 1998. Vernon E. Davis 2000. South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia between 1961 and 1973. The authors address a gamut of subjects from the physical ordeal of torture and deprivation that required clarification of the Code of Conduct to the sometimes more onerous psychological challenges of indoctrination, adjustments to new routines and relationships, and mere coping and passing time under the most monotonous, inhospitable conditions.Â Original Title. Honor Bound: American Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia, 1961-1973. ASIN. B00AVXTGHO.