The Battle Behind Bars

Navy and Marine POWs in the Vietnam War

Stuart I. Rochester

Front Cover: Lieutenant Commander Robert Shumaker, shown here at capture in February 1965, was the second pilot shot down over North Vietnam.

THE U.S. NAVY AND THE VIETNAM WAR
Edward J. Marolda and Sandra J. Doyle, *Series Editors*

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Navy and Marine POWs in the Vietnam War

Stuart I. Rochester

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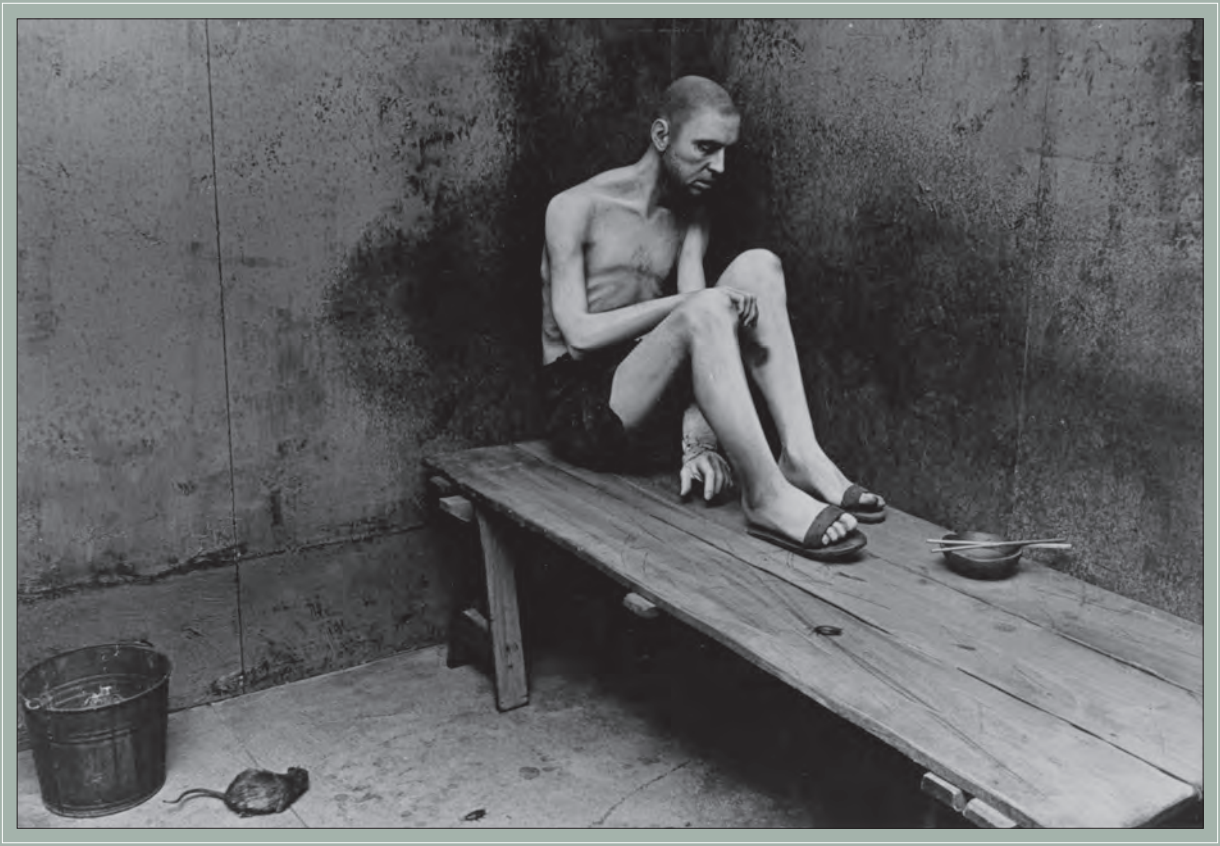

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This image, part of a Pentagon corridor exhibit during the Vietnam War, depicts the environment of a typical Hanoi prison cell.

PROLOGUE

It was fitting that the senior officer aboard the first plane to land at Clark Air Base in the Philippines following the release of the American prisoners of war from Hanoi in 1973 was a naval officer. When a thin, wan Captain Jeremiah Denton descended the ramp to a bank of microphones and uttered the poignant words, "We are honored to have had the opportunity to serve our country under difficult circumstances," he spoke for the entire body of comrades who over the past decade had endured the longest wartime captivity of any group of U.S. prisoners in the nation's history. But no servicemen suffered through a longer, rougher captivity, or played a more prominent role in the leadership and life of the American-occupied prison camps in Southeast Asia, than the veteran Navy and Marine POWs among the Operation Homecoming returnees. They comprised a high percentage of the early captures, dominated the ranks of the early seniors, and contributed vitally by deed and by example to the high standard of conduct and resistance that so distinguished the POWs of the Vietnam War.

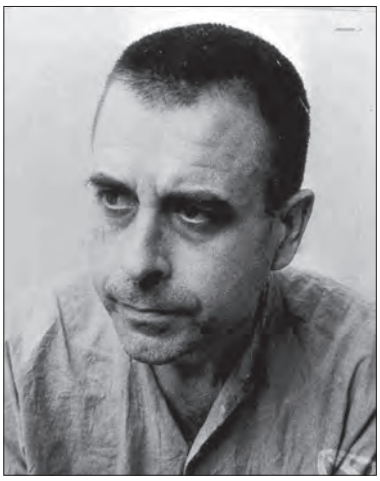
All told, the nearly six hundred U.S. prisoners, including 25 civilians, repatriated between February and April 1973 during Operation Homecoming included 138 Navy and 26 Marine Corps personnel. Additionally, another seven Navy POWs had either escaped (two) or been released (five) earlier, and nine died in captivity. Captured Marines besides the Homecoming contingent included nine who died while incarcerated, ten who escaped, two who were released prior to 1973, and one who was returned in 1979. Although only a fraction of the services' POW totals of previous wars, they, along with captured members of the other services, had an influence and significance disproportionate to their small numbers, owing to their being at the center of a war waged in large part by propaganda and political persuasion in which prisoners were key pawns and bargaining chips.

The Marine captives fell primarily into two categories: aviators shot down over North Vietnam and held in permanent detention facilities in and around Hanoi, and younger enlistees and NCOs (noncommissioned officers), along with a handful of officers, seized by Viet Cong or North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troops in ground action in South Vietnam. The latter group was moved between makeshift camps mostly in the northern provinces of the South before joining the first group in the North. Because of the disparity in age and rank and related factors of training and discipline, as well as their separate geographical locations and circumstances of confinement, the POW experiences of the two groups were distinct. Neither had an easy road, but each encountered advantages and disadvantages relative to their situation that improved or complicated their lot.

By contrast, captured Navy personnel were a homogeneous group who for the most part came from similar backgrounds and, allowing for differences in dates and duration of captivity, shared a similar experience in prison. Of the 138 men Navy analysts examined at Homecoming, all were officers and aviators, the majority college-educated, with an average age of 31 at time of capture and five years on average spent in confinement between 1964 and 1973. All were captured and held in North Vietnam following shootdowns or accidents that required them to ditch their planes in the North. Notable exceptions among those returned to U.S. control earlier were two pilots, Lieutenant Charles Klusmann and Lieutenant (jg) Dieter Dengler, who went down in and subsequently escaped from Laos, and Seaman Douglas Hegdahl, who joined his aviator comrades in the Hanoi prison system after falling from his ship in the Gulf of Tonkin.

The unconventional nature of the war and the unforgiving environment of Southeast Asia inflicted special hardships on the Vietnam-era POWs, whether they spent their captivity in the

jungles of the South or the jails of the North. All were affected by the extremes of a monsoonal climate that brought misery to captor and captive alike. Oppressively hot and humid summers that turned cells into ovens alternated with bone-chilling winters, the cold made worse by lack of adequate clothing and blankets. The absence of edible food, potable water, and medicine in POW encampments in the South, and their chronic scarcity in the North, caused widespread hunger, malnutrition, and disease. Compounding the harsh elements were challenges peculiar to an undeclared war that left American prisoners in a legal limbo. Characterizing the fallen aviators and captured ground personnel as "air pirates" and mercenaries, the enemy denied them the protection of the Geneva wartime conventions and at one point threatened to put the prisoners on trial for war crimes.



DPMO Files

Senior POW leaders in Hanoi, Navy Commanders James B. Stockdale, left, and Jeremiah A. Denton Jr.

Downed pilots suffered serious injuries—burns, wrenched sockets, broken vertebrae—from both high-speed ejections and low-level bailouts that resulted in hard parachute landings on often rough terrain. Dr. Richard Wilbur, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health and Environment during the 1973 repatriation, estimated that nearly one-third of the returning Navy and Air Force pilots entered captivity with major fractures. Wounds and injuries typically went untreated, sometimes at the prisoner's insistence. The men often worried less about infection and discomfort than permanent disability from botched surgery or unnecessary amputation. Marine prisoners in the South, stuffed into bamboo cages lacking shelter or even primitive sanitation, fell victim to malaria, pneumonia, and all manner of parasitical and intestinal illnesses. The deficient diet and nonexistent hygiene of an itinerant captivity left them susceptible to excruciating, sometimes fatal bouts of dysentery and beriberi.

The brutal conditions were matched by abusive handling—systematic torture in the North, exhausting marches and cruel neglect in the South, and the danger of outright execution for the unfortunate few held in Laos. Even during periods of relaxed treatment prisoners confronted crippling anxiety and depression over their uncertain fate; as the captivity lengthened, mental deterioration became as grave a threat to survival as physical deprivation. The horrors of captivity in Southeast Asia may have been surpassed by atrocities committed by the Communist captors in Korea, but the period of incarceration in Korea was much shorter and the episodes of severe punishment and suffering not as recurrent. Marine Chief Warrant Officer John Frederick survived repeated torture and years of health problems before succumbing to typhoid in the summer of 1972, just months before the POWs were freed. The sheer length of captivity in so hostile an environment—Frederick was well into his seventh year in prison when he died—introduced risks and perils that gave an extra dimension to suffering in Vietnam unknown in Korea for all its own particular abominations.

Almost from the moment of capture, U.S. POWs of the Vietnam War faced major challenges and profound adjustments. Navy pilot Lieutenant Commander Robert Doremus remembered the trauma of his initial confinement in a squalid cell

in Hanoi, which contrasted sharply with the spit-and-polish gleam of the quarters he had occupied hours before on board his carrier. "The quick change from a field grade officer to pajama clad captive, from clean sheeted foam rubber pillowed bed . . . to cement bed complete with foot stocks" had an Alice-into-the-rabbit-hole suddenness. Navy prisoners as a group might have been expected to adjust more readily than their Air Force or Army comrades to their sharply circumscribed existence, having been accustomed to cramped conditions on board ships. But there was no prior experience to prepare one for the loss of toothbrushes, hot water, and other essentials to perform simple ablutions; the nightly invasion of foraging rodents and mosquitoes; the stench from fetid waste buckets and soiled clothes; and the extended stays in solitary. At length they would devise substitute clocks and calendars to track time, exercises to stay fit, techniques to relieve toothaches and mask odors, and strategies to cope with numbing routine and malaise. Marine Major Howard Dunn commented after the war that in terms of education, maturity, and survival skills, the officer-aviators who dominated the POW rolls in Vietnam were "vastly superior to any group of prisoners in any previous conflict in which the United States has engaged." Yet much more than proficiency and training, their adaptation would depend on qualities of resiliency and faith, for which rank or résumé were no guarantor of success.

In the end, the Navy and Marine Corps could point with pride to the performance of the great majority of their prisoners of war but also had to acknowledge instances of weakness, misconduct, and outright collaboration with the enemy by a few men. As Medal of Honor recipient Captain (later Vice Admiral) James Stockdale noted, the elemental tests posed by captivity in Southeast Asia brought out "the very best and the very worst" in individuals. As much as they relied on the cohesiveness, support, and inspiration of their fellow inmates, their experience under such mental and physical duress ultimately became intensely personal. It was indicative of how often inexplicable and divergent were the paths taken to negotiate what one prisoner called the "sojourn through hell" that the same services which produced some of the most esteemed POW leaders and most remarkable profiles in courage also produced some of the most conspicuous failures and slackers. The journey that ended with Denton's words on the tarmac at Clark brought some of the prisoners home to hard-won honor and tributes and others to new trials. For all of them, their tenure as POWs would be a defining chapter in their lives, just as their homecoming would be a singular moment in the life of the nation that celebrated their return. ⚓

Panhandles of North Vietnam and Laos.

A CHRONICLE OF THE CAPTIVITY

Although the enemy captured or held American prisoners in Cambodia during the Vietnam War, and two U.S. POWs (including Navy Lieutenant Commander Robert Flynn) went down over Communist China and spent their captivity there, for the most part the American POWs were taken prisoner in North Vietnam, South Vietnam, or Laos. Beginning with Laos, it is helpful at the outset of this history to reconstruct the nature and sequence of the captivity in the respective theaters.

Laos: The Shadow War

At the start of the 1960s, in Washington's view the greater concern, and the focus of the U.S. anti-Communist effort in Southeast Asia, was not Vietnam but Laos, and it was there that the first American—and U.S. Navy—POWs of the Indochina conflict fell into enemy hands. Though the Kennedy administration was intent on restricting U.S. forces in Laos to an advisory and reconnaissance role, contact with the enemy, as in Vietnam, became inevitable as the U.S. involvement expanded and intensified. By the spring of 1961, a half-dozen Americans had already been captured by pro-Communist Laotian rebels (Pathet Lao), including Navy Seaman John McMorrow, a mechanic on board a U.S. helicopter that crashed while ferrying a squad of Royal Lao government troops. Over the course of the decade, only a handful of Navy and Marine personnel followed McMorrow into Laotian captivity, but among those were two of the more riveting survival and escape stories of the war.

Ringed with sharp karst ridges and plunging valleys, Laos is more desolate and isolated than Vietnam. Even more so than the Vietnamese, its primitive people had little understanding of or respect for international conventions. The backward country acquired a special notoriety for prisoners of war held there, who went by their own nickname, "Lulus," for "Legendary Union of Laotian Unfortunates." As bad as captivity was under the Communists in Vietnam, Americans taken captive by the Pathet Lao often fared worse, to the point that U.S. pilots typically elected to avoid going down in Laos even it meant nursing a crippled aircraft into North Vietnam. As Navy Lieutenant George Coker, a North Vietnamese-held POW with knowledge of Laos, testified after the war: "Even if you are healthy in the chute, when you finally land you've got to penetrate those trees . . . and then you've got to fight that karst . . . . That stuff can be so sheer that . . . it will actually peel you like a grater." Even if you managed to land safely, Coker noted, the trackless expanse, "the thing that gave you protection from the enemy," became the enemy itself because of the scarcity of easily obtainable food or water and the absence of friend or foe to dispense even minimal first aid. Seaman McMorrow was lucky to be released with others in his group after a 15-month detention in remote mountain and jungle stockades that saw an ailing U.S. Army captain shot to death when he became a burden to his captors. Only a timely cease-fire among rival guerrilla factions and negotiations involving an International Red Cross representative saved the McMorrow group.

The first Navy pilot captured in the Vietnam War was Lieutenant Charles Klusmann, seized in Laos on 6 June 1964 when enemy ground fire hit his RF-8 reconnaissance plane. He was forced to eject over the Plain of Jars not far from the area he was photographing. Frequent moves, the onset of debilitating dysentery, and the lack of comradeship to sustain him, he being the only American in camp, weakened the aviator's resolve. His captors pressured him to put in writing that he received "good treatment." Upon recovering strength, Klusmann escaped with a Laotian companion familiar with the region who guided him over backwoods trails to friendly forces. The prisoner's detailed report of his three-month incarceration underscored the

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Lieutenant Charles Klusmann with Vice Admiral Roy L. Johnson, Commander Seventh Fleet, August 1964 after Klusmann's escape from captivity in Laos.

vulnerability of an isolated individual under pressure of interrogation and had a significant influence on subsequent Navy POW training (see "Resistance," p. 23).

One of those who may have benefited from Klusmann's experience was a second Navy pilot seized in Laos who also managed to escape. Navy Lieutenant (jg) Dieter Dengler crashlanded his A-l Skyraider near Laos's Mu Gia Pass on 1 February 1966. According to a lengthy debriefing and later published memoir, he survived severe punishment, terrible illness, and near-starvation. After he broke away from guards, a passing A-1 pilot miraculously spotted him barely conscious on the morning of 20 July, and a helicopter lifted him out. Dengler's account, which traced his 23 days on the run from pursuers, could never be fully corroborated and contained inconsistencies that may have stemmed in part from malaria-induced hallucinations. But the confirmed beheading of an Air Force lieutenant who attempted escape with him was graphic enough testimony to the undeniable dangers he and other POWs faced in Laos.

As Vietnam overtook Laos in importance after 1963, the list of U.S. casualties, and captives, there began to swell, while the number of American prisoners in Laos remained small and scattered. The only Marine known to be captured in Laos was Corporal Frank Cius, a gunner aboard a helicopter brought down by enemy fire near Laos's border with South Vietnam in June 1967. Cius and Navy Lieutenant (jg) James Bedinger, the latter shot down over Laos in November 1969, were moved north to link up with other U.S. prisoners in Hanoi. Bedinger became a principal cog in the POW communications network in the main prison compound at Hoa Lo. A top senior officer at Hoa Lo, Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Robinson Risner, called the spirited redhead "a ball of fire" for his daily publication of a cellblock "newsletter" on strips of toilet paper.

The air strikes that continued over Laos through the decade in fact claimed scores of U.S. aviators but produced few known POWs. On the one hand, a relatively high percentage of downed fliers who managed to avoid the karst and heavy tree cover were rescued on the ground in Laos. Unlike in North Vietnam, Laos's sparse population and proximity to search and rescue teams operating out of U.S. airfields in South Vietnam and Thailand offered good odds on recovering pilots who survived their shootdowns. On the other hand, among those who were not rescued, most disappeared, their fate remaining a mystery in many instances, owing to the dearth of official contacts with the Pathet Lao and the likelihood that many who were seen safely ejecting from their planes died upon impact on the treacherous ridges or strung up in the thick jungle canopy where —even if alive initially and able to reach the ground—they were unable to obtain sustenance or treatment for the reasons described

DPMO File

A bamboo cage in which American prisoners in South Vietnam were kept.

by Coker. Between Dengler's escape in 1966 and the 1973 repatriation, no American POW returned from Laos, so there was an information vacuum on the fate of those captured there. Had Klusmann and Dengler not fled to freedom after short captivities, they might well have perished in Laos's shadows themselves. Of some three hundred U.S. personnel listed as missing in action over Laos, only nine turned up on the capture rolls among those released during Operation Homecoming, including Bedinger and Cius. The rest presumably fell victim to either the rugged Laotian wilderness or atrocities committed by villagers or enemy soldiers.

South Vietnam: Marine POWs in a Fight for Survival

Beginning in 1965, U.S. troop strength in South Vietnam grew exponentially from about 25,000 at the start of that year to approximately 180,000 in December and almost a half million by the end of 1967. The steady Americanization of the war exposed both U.S. military and civilian personnel in South Vietnam to increased dangers, including the risk of capture. The number of captured did not match the lengthening list of Navy and Air Force pilots apprehended in the North but was significant nonetheless, far exceeding the number of Americans seized in Laos. By the end of 1967, the number of U.S. POWs seized in the South had climbed to 100, the count then doubling early in 1968 as a result of the enemy's Tet offensive. After Tet, the rate of increase dropped sharply for the remainder of the war, the total eventually reaching 250. Some three dozen Marines, three-quarters of the service's POW total for all of Southeast Asia, were among them.

Prisoners held in the South—besides Marines, mostly soldiers and civilians—faced tests that more

closely resembled the conditions in Laos than in North Vietnam. Those in the custody of Viet Cong guerrillas were hauled long distances between VC hideouts in deteriorating condition. They encountered less regimented discipline and fewer episodes of planned, programmed torture but a more chaotic, brutish daily existence than that experienced by U.S. aviators confined in Hanoi. Their relative youth, thinner leadership, and greater isolation, with fewer comrades with whom to organize resistance or share information and relieve anxiety, placed them at a comparative disadvantage. Additionally, housed in bamboo cages and thatched huts rather than concrete cellblocks, they were more at the mercy of the elements than their compatriots in the North. The latter suffered terribly themselves from the extremes of hot and cold weather, but their shelter at least afforded some protection from blistering sun and monsoonal rains. Other dangers in the South included leeches, poisonous snakes, guards with short tempers and hair-trigger nerves from hunger and fatigue, and "friendly fire" from U.S. and allied forces targeting VC locations.

Throughout the Vietnam conflict, one in five Americans taken prisoner by the Viet Cong or NVA in the South could expect to die in captivity, as compared with one in twenty seized in the North. The mortality record among those captured in the South would have been higher yet but for the fact that some two dozen managed to escape, capitalizing on the one notable advantage that accrued to prisoners there: the same lack of sheltering walls that left them exceedingly vulnerable to the external environment removed a principal barrier to breaking out and slipping away. The proximity to friendly forces also helped escapees. Including several individuals who were in custody less than 48 hours, about two dozen American POWs escaped from Viet Cong or NVA captivity in the South. Though not a large number, that was still two dozen more than escaped from North Vietnam, and over 10 percent of the total number seized in the South. Most of those who were successful—including Marine Major Richard Risner; Sergeants James Dodson, Frank Iodice, and Albert Potter; Corporals Walter Eckes, Steven Nelson, and William Tallaferro; and Privates Joseph North, Walter Hamilton, and Michael Roha—accomplished their getaways within days or weeks of their capture while they still had the strength.

Major Risner was one of the few Marine officers seized by the Viet Cong in the South. The first was Captain Donald Cook, whose raw courage and determined resistance earned him the Medal of Honor. Lieutenant William Grammar never had a chance to prove his mettle, suffering a horrific death shortly after his capture northeast of Quang Tri in May 1967 when Viet Cong attackers executed him and Army Sergeant Orville Frits apparently following their torture. More fortunate were Army Captains Paul Montague and Bruce Archer, seized in March 1968 when their helicopter was shot down southwest of their base at Phu Bai, and Marine 1st Lieutenant James DiBernardo, taken by the VC, along with Corporal John Deering, when their Armed Forces TV station in Hue fell during Tet. Montague, Archer, and DiBernardo were marched north with other Tet captures, an arduous trip barefoot through mud and over rocks. They arrived inside North Vietnam at a place the Americans called variously Bao Cao (Vietnamese for "please" or "may I") or, owing to the shape of its cellblock windows, "Portholes." Although crude by any normal standard, the accommodations were better than those along the trail or in the open jungle. By the end of 1968, when they were hauled further north to join the POWs in Hanoi, they were on the road to relative safety if not comfort. The three officers made it home in 1973 with two other Marine officers briefly held prisoner in the South late in the war, Captain James Walsh and Lieutenant Alan Kroboth.

Most of the Marines captured in the South were apprehended either in the vicinity of Danang, the military hub of the U.S. deployment in northern South Vietnam, or on the northern frontier around Hue and Khe Sanh, where the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese launched their ferocious Tet assault and netted scores of fresh POWs. Barring escape or quick transfer across the DMZ to the less precarious confines of Bao Cao, incarceration in this

Marine Captain Donald Cook

CAPTAIN DONALD G. COOK became the first U.S. Marine POW in the Vietnam War when, on 31 December 1964, he was wounded and captured in a battle near Binh Gia while accompanying an Army of Vietnam (ARVN) battalion that was overrun by Viet Cong. From the outset, Cook took a hard-line stance, refusing to cooperate or even respond to the enemy's commands. Moved northwest to a series of camps along the Cambodian border that served as a VC sanctuary until B-52 strikes pounded the area, then back east over some of the roughest terrain in the South, Cook contracted malaria, which made the 200-mile trek excruciating. Douglas Ramsey, a U.S. foreign service officer imprisoned with Cook, and Army POWs present in camps along the way later attested to his bravery and indomitable will. According to one, Cook was so hard-nosed, "I believe he would have stopped shitting if he had thought 'Charlie' was using it for fertilizer. . . . If you don't count eating, Cook was being one hundred percent uncooperative, to the point he wouldn't tell them his symptoms when he wasn't feeling well. They wanted him to write them down, but he'd refuse to write anything since his capture, even his name."

USMC Division

Captain Donald Cook, the first U.S. Marine captured in Vietnam and the first and only Marine in history to receive the Medal of Honor for exemplary conduct while in captivity.

Medal of Honor

Cook paid dearly for his intransigence, receiving less food than the others and spending more time in solitary. Still, he shared what rations he had with his fellow prisoners, helped nurse the sick, and led by example even as his own health deteriorated. Seeking cover from unrelenting allied bombardment, the captors holed up for a year in a miserable low-lying campsite that flooded during the monsoon season. With even rice in short supply, Cook became gravely ill with anemia and dysentery, along with the worsening malaria. When the group pulled up stakes late in 1967 and headed back toward the Cambodian border and the drier highlands, Cook's body finally gave out and he died en route.

For years Cook's heroism was little known outside the tiny band of POWs with him in that region of South Vietnam. When Ramsey returned at Homecoming, he sent a letter to the Marine Corps Commandant, General Robert E. Cushman Jr., detailing Cook's strict adherence to the Code of Conduct, selfless sacrifice, and extraordinary valor in the face of failing health. The Marine Corps drafted recommendations for a high honor for the gallant officer while continuing to list him as missing in action and probably still a prisoner of war. With his name finally removed from the MIA list in February 1980, on 16 May of that year, at an impressive ceremony in the Pentagon's courtyard, Donald Cook's widow received her husband's Medal of Honor from Secretary of the Navy Edward Hidalgo. The Navy further recognized the Marine, who was promoted to colonel while in captivity, by naming a ship in his honor—the *Arleigh Burke*-class, Aegis guided missile destroyer USS *Donald Cook* (DDG 75). ⚓

region often amounted to a death sentence, as the combination of extreme privation and inhospitable geography over time placed even the fittest at risk. So severe were the living conditions at Tam Ky, a guerrilla complex south of Danang, that six of the 10 U.S. Marines held there between 1967 and 1970 never made it out. Army physician Captain Floyd Kushner, the only officer at the camp, recalled his helplessness as the victims, several of them still in their teens, died in his arms from the ravages of starvation and beriberi:

> We were eating approximately three coffee cups of vermin-infested rice per day, with some fish sauce. We had a terrible skin disease that was keeping people up all night . . . [and] causing a lot of psychological anguish as well as physical anguish. We were horribly malnourished. People had malaria and dysentery, so that they were perhaps defecating many, many times a day, fifty or sixty times a day, could not make it to the latrine so that the prison yard was littered with human excrement. It was the rainy season. It was cold and miserable, and in general just a very horrible—I don't know the words that can describe how bad these times were.

The casualties included Marine Corporals Edwin Grissett, Robert Sherman, Dennis Hammond, Frederick Burns, and Joseph Zawtocki and Private Earl Weatherman. Weatherman died attempting escape.

One of the few survivors of the Tam Ky ordeal was Private Robert Garwood who, upon his return to the United States in 1979, became the subject of the longest court-martial in Marine Corps history. Garwood's story was complicated and unusual, but not altogether unique. Garwood shared the fear, vulnerability, and confusion that gripped so many of the young captives at Tam Ky and elsewhere in the northern provinces of South Vietnam as they witnessed comrades fall like dominoes to the plague-like conditions. The men looked desperately for a way out, but they were handicapped by the lack of psychological or survival training and the absence of organization and senior guidance but for Dr. Kushner. Between his capture in September 1965 and 1968, Garwood drifted steadily from collusion to defection, beginning with the making of propaganda tapes in exchange for preferred treatment and eventually wearing a Viet Cong uniform, interrogating and guarding his own countrymen, and, according to some reports, fighting alongside the VC. By 1969, not even his handlers knew quite what to make of him or do with him. He spent the next decade in relaxed but restive semi-confinement before getting a message to U.S. authorities that he was ready to return home. Before the war was out, three other young Marine POWs who had passed through one or more of the South's northern camps would be among a group of eight enlistees disparagingly referred to by fellow prisoners as the "Peace Committee" for their antiwar declarations and propaganda contributions to the enemy.

By April 1971, as the guerrilla stronghold in the Tam Ky region increasingly came under allied air attack, the enemy shepherded the surviving Marines and other remaining occupants of the Kushner camp north to Hanoi. The POWs arrived there at a time of much improved treatment so that the difference between the North and South captivities was even more pronounced. In Hanoi's cells they would encounter less freedom and more discipline (in part from the new demands of a functioning POW organization) than they had been accustomed to in the jungle, but they also had cleaner clothes, more palatable food, and an occasional bath. "After South Vietnam," one of the newcomers observed, "you couldn't put a price on things like these."

North Vietnam: The Plight of Captured Aviators

In the spring of 1965, coinciding with the introduction of American ground combat forces in the South, the U.S. involvement in Vietnam turned another key corner with President Lyndon Johnson's order to commence bombing operations in the North. The Navy's aerial activity in Southeast Asia

OSD History Collection

Hoa Lo, the "Hanoi Hilton," was the main POW prison in downtown Hanoi. After 1970, the bulk of American prisoners were housed in the "Unity" compound, foreground, of the prison.

OSD History Collection

Lieutenant (jg) Everett Alvarez Jr., the first American aviator shot down and imprisoned in North Vietnam, spent eight and a half years in captivity.

until then had been limited mostly to reconnaissance missions over Laos and one-time reprisal raids over North Vietnam such as those following the torpedo boat attack on the U.S. destroyer *Maddox* (DD 731) in the Gulf of Tonkin. During this operation, on 5 August 1964, Lieutenant (jg) Everett Alvarez Jr., was downed by antiaircraft fire and became the first naval aviator and the first American captured in North Vietnam. The more extensive bombing campaign launched in March 1965, under the code name Rolling Thunder, soon had the Navy and Air Force flying 1,500 attack sorties per month against the North. A steady stream of POWs joined Alvarez in Hanoi.

A week after his capture Alvarez was trucked from a countryside detention station into the capital and deposited at the municipal prison known as Hoa Lo, meaning "fiery furnace" in Vietnamese. Built by the French at the turn of the century, it was surrounded by thick concrete walls 15 to 20 feet high and occupied a trapezoidal city block. Officials divided the prison into several sections, which they later opened and reconfigured to house the POWs. Over the years, the POWs would name their respective compounds within the complex "Heartbreak Hotel," "New Guy Village," "Little Vegas," and "Camp Unity." The latter, by far the largest section,

OSD History Collection

North Vietnamese militiamen escort a bullock cart carrying a captured American pilot to prison.

opened late in 1970 when the North Vietnamese decided to consolidate in downtown Hanoi the bulk of their U.S. prisoners scattered up to then throughout the North and South. With grim irony the first American occupants of Hoa Lo dubbed the forbidding fortress the "Hanoi Hilton."

Because of rigid constraints on target selection—Johnson allegedly said they could not bomb an outhouse without his approval—and strict rules of engagement, pilots found themselves flying into heavily defended areas on predictable flight paths that exposed them to great risk while yielding often token results. Such operations produced deep frustration and high casualties. By summer 1965, more than thirty American airmen had been killed or were presumed missing in action and a dozen had been captured, including the first Air Force POW, Lieutenant Hayden Lockhart. The Navy pilots in this group included Lieutenant Commanders Robert Shumaker and Raymond Vohden and Lieutenants Phillip Butler and John McKamey. Denton, with the rank of commander at capture, was seized with his bombardier-navigator, Lieutenant (jg) William Tschudy, when their A-6 Intruder went down during a bombing run on 18 July. In late August, Commander Fred Franke, Lieutenant Commander Robert Doremus, and Lieutenants (jg) Richard Brunhaver and Edward Davis joined the others in the Heartbreak section of Hoa Lo. September brought two senior officers who would become key resistance leaders—Commander Stockdale and Commander Wendell Rivers. Along with Alvarez and the survivors from the early captures in the South, the aviator-officers imprisoned in the spring and summer of 1965 would become the longest held U.S. POWs in history.

The first Marine aviators downed in the North, Captain Harlan Chapman and Major Howard Dunn,

entered Hoa Lo on 5 November and 7 December, respectively. They were part of a rapidly multiplying community that saw the POW population climb to more than sixty by Christmas—about half Air Force and half Navy and Marine. Among the fall 1965 arrivals were Navy Lieutenants (jg) David Wheat, Porter Halyburton, Ralph Gaither, and Rodney Knutson; Lieutenant Commander James Bell; and two more senior officers who would also lead the resistance, Commanders Harry Jenkins and Howard Rutledge.

To accommodate the overflow at Hoa Lo (until later renovations only the Heartbreak and New Guy sections were ready to receive prisoners), the North Vietnamese opened two new camps in late summer 1965. "Briarpatch," named by the Americans for its harsh features, was located 35 miles west of Hanoi in a mountainous region near the town of Xom Ap Lo. For the year or so it was in use, the camp had no running water or electricity, and shuttered windows accentuated the gloom of unlit compartments. Confinement there was the closest match in the North to the Spartan circumstances in the South. Not as primitive or remote, but in its own way just as desolate, was the "Zoo," an abandoned French site, once perhaps a movie studio or art colony, on the outskirts of Hanoi near the village of Cu Loc. The concrete buildings, hastily converted into cells, were in varying states of disrepair. The prisoners had to sleep on cement floors for lack of even bed slabs. Cows, chickens, and other farm animals roamed the grounds, which were littered with old film canisters and yellowing posters. The most distinctive structure was a large fetid swimming pool where guards raised fish. The POWs gave the dozen or so one-story buildings names like "Barn," "Chicken Coop," "Stable," and "Pigsty." The Zoo became a primary detention center during the early years of the Northern captivity, holding more than 50 prisoners by February 1966 and about 120 at the start of 1967. As a rule, after September 1965 and until the creation of additional space at Hoa Lo in 1967, American captives were brought to the Hilton for registration and other "preliminaries" and then moved to the Zoo or other facilities for long-term incarceration. The men were periodically returned to Hoa Lo for correction or interrogation.

During 1966, almost one hundred U.S. airmen were added to the POW rolls in the North. In the first four months of the year, Navy aviators dominated the casualty list, but the number of Air Force casualties eclipsed the Navy's by year's end as its role in the air war expanded. The senior-most naval officer claimed in 1966, Commander John Abbott, died shortly after being taken prisoner on

NHHC Artifact Collection

Model of the "Zoo" prison compound.

NHHC 702652

Lieutenant (jg) David G. Rehmann, shot down and injured in December 1966, is paraded before news cameras.

20 April. In February 1966, three Navy fliers who would become mainstays of the POW organization—Lieutenant Gerald Coffee, Lieutenant Commander Render Crayton, and Lieutenant (jg) Larry Spencer—reached Hoa Lo. Coffee was especially in poor condition from ejection injuries and rough handling en route to Hanoi. Also in bad shape was Commander James Mulligan, who suffered a broken shoulder and cracked ribs when bailing out of his smoking A-4 Skyhawk on 20 March. In an experience that would become a first rite of passage for most of the downed pilots, Mulligan was picked up by armed peasants and delivered to local militiamen, lugged blindfolded and without shoes over gravelly roads, and pelted by angry mobs on the way to the capital. (Pilots typically had their boots removed at capture, going barefoot until outfitted with sandals once behind bars. In the South, some prisoners went without shoes for the length of their captivity there.) Later 1966 shootdowns included Marine Captain Orson Swindle and Navy aviators Commander Theodore Kopfman; Lieutenant Commanders John Fellowes and Nels Tanner; Lieutenants George Coker, James Connell, Paul Galanti, and John Heilig; and Lieutenant (jg) David Rehmann—all of whom would figure prominently in the POW story. Rehmann's post-capture photograph showing the badly injured pilot being prodded past a gauntlet of assembled cameramen and spectators became internationally famous as a symbol of the American prisoners' plight.

More Americans were taken prisoner in 1967 than in any other year of the war. Casualty analysts in Washington counted 170 U.S. pilots seized by Hanoi as of April 1967. To make room for the latest influx, prison officials opened a new compound at Hoa Lo that the POWs called Little Vegas, after the Nevada resort well-known to fighter pilots for its proximity to Nellis Air Force Base. Individual cellblocks acquired the nicknames of casinos—Riviera, Stardust, Desert Inn, and the largest, with 15 rooms, Thunderbird. On 19 May, the enemy seized six Navy aviators who were celled in Vegas after a brief initiation at Heartbreak.

Lieutenant Commander Eugene B. "Red" McDaniel was captured when his A-6 was struck by a surface-to-air missile while on a raid over Van Dien, a truck repair center south of Hanoi the fliers called "Little Detroit." Ejecting at 550 knots, near the speed of sound, McDaniel smashed his left knee on evacuation and crushed two vertebrae when he landed in a tall tree, unsnagged his chute, and fell 40 feet to the ground. Before rescue helicopters could reach him, armed locals seized the pilot and turned him over to authorities. Other Navy fliers taken into custody on 19 May were Lieutenant Commanders William Stark and Kay Russell and Lieutenants (jg) Gareth Anderson, William Metzger, and Charles Plumb.

Metzger was in even worse shape than McDaniel, with pus draining from huge open wounds on his arms and a deep gash in his thigh where a two-pound piece of shrapnel had penetrated. The other leg was broken, and the stench from the untended wounds was such that the Vietnamese burned incense sticks to counter it. So convinced were they of his imminent demise, they bothered neither to treat nor to clothe him. When thrown into a room with Metzger at Vegas, McDaniel found him lying naked on the floor. Were it not for McDaniel's and other comrades' care—scrounging cloths to bandage him, keeping rats

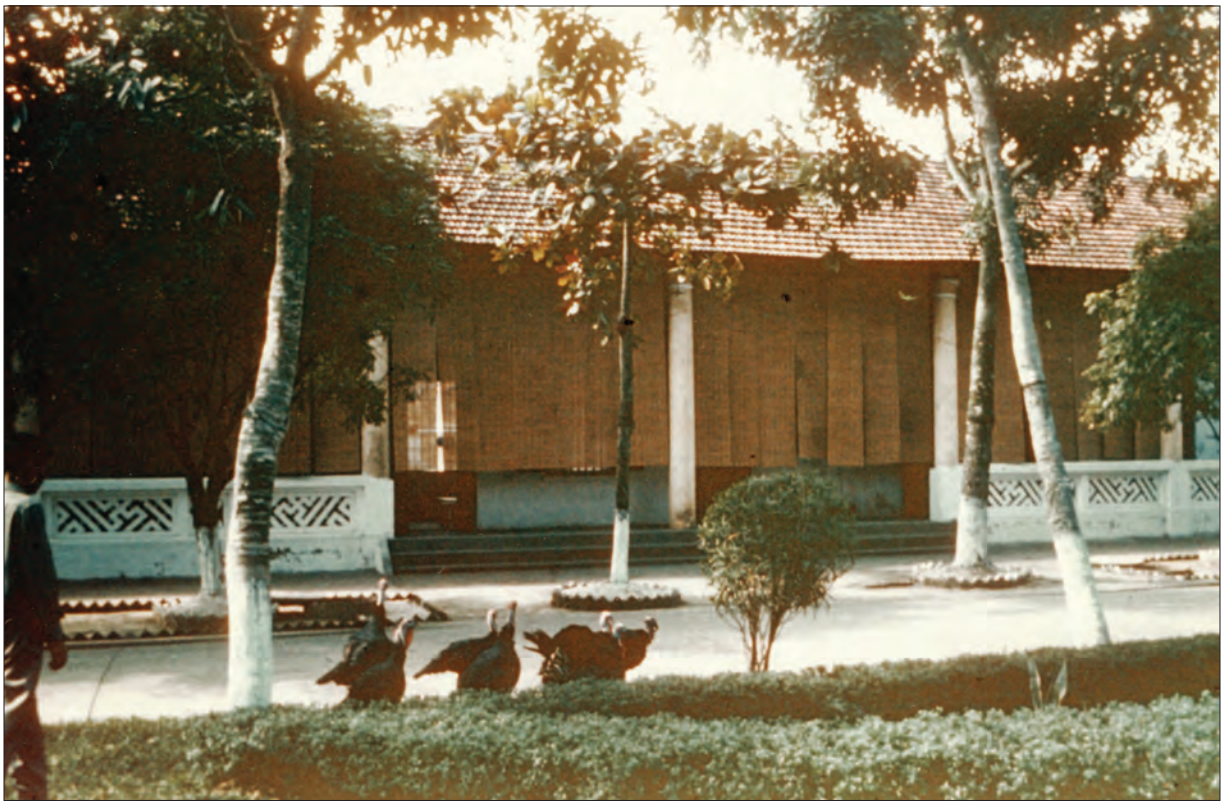
at bay, and pleading for medicine—the invalid would likely have died. Metzger was a perfect example of how a critically ill POW, who almost certainly would have succumbed in the itinerant captivity of the South, could hang on in the North because of marginally better conditions and the presence of capable, solicitous cellmates to comfort and nurse him.

Before long Vegas and the Zoo themselves became crowded, the Zoo adding a section in October 1967 that newcomers labeled the "Annex." Metzger's recovery notwithstanding, the combination of supply shortages and stepped-up interrogation and enforcement produced a lethal mix of austerity and brutality during the so-called middle years, 1967–1969, that made survival in the northern prisons problematic. Of 21 U.S. servicemen who became POWs during the two-week interval 17–31 May 1967, eight would die in captivity, including three naval aviators—Lieutenant Commanders James Griffin and Homer Smith and Lieutenant Jack Walters—who perished at Hoa Lo within a day or two of their capture from either untreated shootdown injuries or abuse. A fourth aviator in this group, Lieutenant Ronald Dodge, was thought to be shown in a photo after capture, the prisoner's head heavily bandaged, but Hanoi never acknowledged holding him. A fifth, Commander Kenneth Cameron, hung on until the fall of 1970, when he disappeared after being taken to a hospital.

Occasionally the North Vietnamese activated a new facility for reasons that had less to do with relieving overcrowding than achieving some other purpose. Between June and October 1967, for example, they confined more than thirty of the prisoners in the vicinity of the Yen Phu thermal power plant in northern Hanoi. The captors put the POWs on display in an apparent effort to discourage U.S. bombing of the installation. Among the Navy POWs who turned up as hostages at the power plant, which the Americans named "Dirty Bird" for the blanket of coal dust and general filth that pervaded the place, were 1967 shootdowns Ensign Gary Thornton, Lieutenants (jg) Michael Cronin and Read Mecleary, and veterans Jerry Coffee, Ralph Gaither, and Bill Tschudy, along with Marines Swindle and Frederick.

The middle years were a testing time not only for the American prisoners of war but also for the U.S. commitment to defend Southeast Asia against the Communist assault. Mounting losses, increasing skepticism about the wisdom of United States military involvement in the Indochinese conflict, and worsening problems at home steadily eroded what had always been a thin base of domestic support for the faraway entanglement. Continuing sharp internal debate within the Johnson and then Nixon administrations, between those advocating more massive use of air power and those urging a diplomatic solution, produced a series of on-again, off-again bombing phases. The pauses convinced the enemy—and many of the POWs, who formed opinions from the bits of news they gleaned from new arrivals and overheard broadcasts—of Washington's lack of resolve. In what had come down to a test of political will rather than military might, Hanoi sought to exploit the POWs in a way that deepened the divide among Americans. Such was the context in which the North Vietnamese established yet another POW camp in the spring of 1967, one devoted specifically to the production and dissemination of propaganda.

At the Hanoi Hilton by artist Maxine McCaffrey. Courtesy United States Air Force Art Collection.



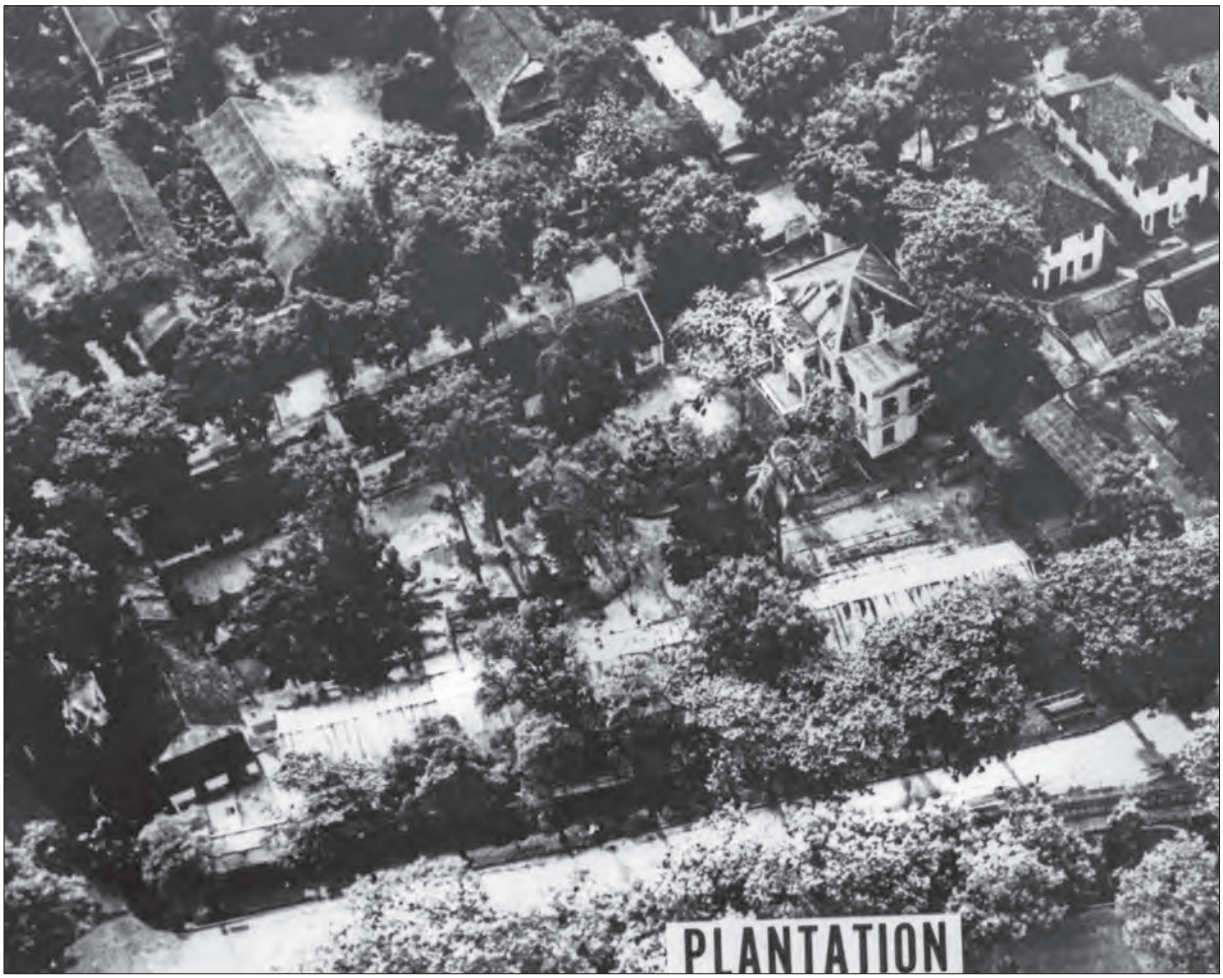
DPMO Files and OSD

Plantation was the "show" camp used by the North Vietnamese to persuade foreign delegations and prominent visitors that they were treating the American prisoners humanely.

Situated on the rim of the downtown district roughly between Dirty Bird and Hoa Lo, the "Plantation" camp acquired its name from the property's once stately grounds that had housed the colonial mayor of Hanoi. The prisoners referred to the tree-lined, two-acre site by several other names as well, "Country Club," "Holiday Inn," and "The Citadel," the latter for its location across the street from the Ministry of Defense. The Vietnamese converted a portion of the facility into a Potemkin village of whitewashed cells, garden patches, and scrubbed corridors that served as a showplace for exhibiting captives to visiting delegations and conducting photo sessions and other staged activities. The prisoners lived in dilapidated but relatively roomy outbuildings that once contained servants' quarters and were brought in to a freshly painted "Show Room" for propaganda events.

The Plantation reached its peak strength of 53 inmates in January 1968—most of them recent shootdowns, who did not yet show scars from mistreatment and had not yet been "corrupted" by the resistance organization and hence were prime candidates for propaganda display. It was here that East German filmmakers shot a widely distributed documentary entitled *Pilots in Pajamas*. It was also at the Plantation that most American antiwar activists touring Vietnam got their first exposure to prison conditions that the Communists touted as "humane and lenient." The visitors were unaware of the controlled and contrived nature of their visit.

For a time the senior officer quartered at Plantation was Navy Lieutenant Commander Richard Stratton, a January 1967 capture. By the time he entered the camp, he was already familiar to an international audience for his bowing in a robotic, Manchurian-candidate-like fashion before a swarm of television cameras in a controversial ploy to negate the public release of an extracted confession. Plantation's most famous resident was Lieutenant Commander John McCain, the son of a four-star admiral and (after July 1968) commander of all U.S. military forces in



OSD History Collection

Aerial view of Plantation prison.

the Pacific. McCain had bailed out upside down at a high speed and suffered multiple traumatic injuries. He barely survived when he landed in a lake nearly unconscious but somehow kicked himself to the surface and activated his life preserver. The young officer—later U.S. senator—would establish his own reputation as a much-respected, stalwart resister. As that, he was but one of an impressive band of Navy cohorts instrumental in stymieing the propaganda operation at the show camp. By 1970, Plantation had outlived its usefulness as a propaganda mill, though it later housed transfers from Laos and the South.

For several years after the Communists' 1968 Tet offensive, the air campaign over North Vietnam gradually wound down. Bombing of the North would be resumed at intervals to maintain pressure on Hanoi for a settlement and to buy time for "Vietnamization," the process for preparing America's ally for the U.S. withdrawal from the war. During this period, U.S. bombing concentrated on interdicting enemy supply lines and troop movements to the south in Laos and along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Between the halt of bombing operations against the North in the fall of 1968 and 1972, when President Richard Nixon ordered large-scale air strikes against North Vietnamese ports and factories in a final attempt to force Hanoi's hand and salvage an acceptable peace, the number of sorties flown by carrier pilots into zones that had produced high casualties dropped markedly.

Even with the leveling off of the POW population and the replenishing of food and medicine in the northern jails as a result of the bombing retrenchment, 1968 and 1969 remained difficult years for the prisoners. In 1968, three new

camps opened outside of Hanoi: "Skid Row" and "Farnsworth" (from a monicker the inmates there attached to a Vietnamese officer)* held mainly Army and Marine arrivals from the South; Son Tay received transfers from Vegas, who briefly called the place "Hope" before it became clear the change of scenery offered no respite from the suffering or despair of a prolonged internment that had no end in sight. In November 1970, U.S. commandos raided Son Tay seeking to rescue the 50 POWs there; the bold, well-executed plan might have succeeded but for flawed intelligence that failed to detect the move of the prisoners to another location months earlier.

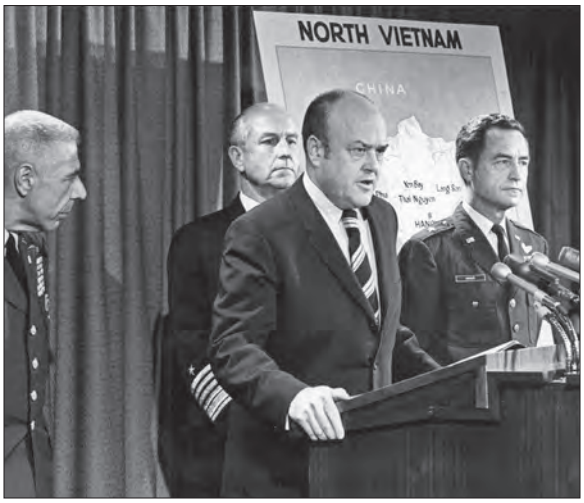
The plan called for Army Rangers to be flown to the prison in five helicopters with tactical aviation providing close air support for the attack. Thinking it was the POW camp, one group of Rangers attacked a sapper school a quarter of a mile away from the prison, killing scores of NVA troops before realizing they were attacking the wrong facility. Within six minutes of hitting the wrong compound, the Rangers were picked up again and then airlifted to Son Tay, where they joined another group of Rangers already inside the walls of the facility. To everyone's great disappointment, no prisoners were found, and 27 minutes after entering Son Tay, all the Rangers were airborne and en route to Thailand. While the Son Tay raid failed to recover any allied POWs, it did send a powerful message to Hanoi that America was far from beaten and showcased America's burgeoning special warfare capability. America had inserted a substantial force deep into enemy territory, caused considerable losses for the enemy, and lost no personnel as a result of the effort.

Only after the fall of 1969, following the death of Ho Chi Minh in September and a decision by the U.S. government to "go public" with the POW issue, which turned the propaganda tables on Hanoi (see "Relief and Release," p. 59), did the long stretch of misery and abuse associated with the middle years finally let up. The inauguration of an era of improved treatment and a more relaxed regime was not without its own continuing challenges, disappointments, and occasional perils, but gradually the prisoners benefited from more benign circumstances and unprecedented opportunities for communication and organization. A series of moves during the summer of 1970 brought many of the jailed pilots to Dan Hoi, a refurbished barracks 10 miles west of Hanoi, about midway between Son Tay and the capital. Dan Hoi represented a major improvement over conditions at Son Tay, Vegas, and elsewhere, with roomy cells that held 8 to 20 prisoners each, individual beds, and more permissive arrangements. Ralph Gaither described his quarters at Dan Hoi as "the best I had while in prison" and his treatment there "the closest we ever came to humane treatment under the Geneva Agreements." The prisoners called the large suburban complex, which had the capacity to hold 320 but housed a hundred fewer than that, Camp "Faith"; unlike Hope, it amounted to a real transformation. It may have been intended as a final way station for the Americans prior to release, until the Son Tay raid convinced the North Vietnamese to abandon the outlying facility and corral their charges in the more secure confines of Hanoi.

In November 1970, the Vietnamese transported the Dan Hoi group to Hoa Lo and by Christmas collected the majority of the American POWs, including a group of the Laotian captures, in the enlarged compound at Unity, on the northwest side of the old prison. Containing seven perimeter open-bay compartments, each accommodating 40 to 60 occupants in a roughly 20-by-60-foot space, and several detached smaller cellblocks, Unity was more crowded and less comfortable than Dan Hoi. However, the facility pulsated with high emotion and excitement as long-separated comrades met and exchanged embraces. By the close of 1970, Unity housed over 340 U.S. POWs, including all of those captured in the North and known to be still alive—the first time all the aviators had been together in a single camp. Typical was the reunion of Navy pilots Jack Fellowes and George Coker, who had not known

**Note: Farnsworth refers to the supposed generosity of comedian Red Skelton's fictional character Joseph P. Farnsworth, who donated hundreds of square miles of Death Valley to support his charities while keeping a few acres of Manhattan Island to eke out a "meager" existence.*

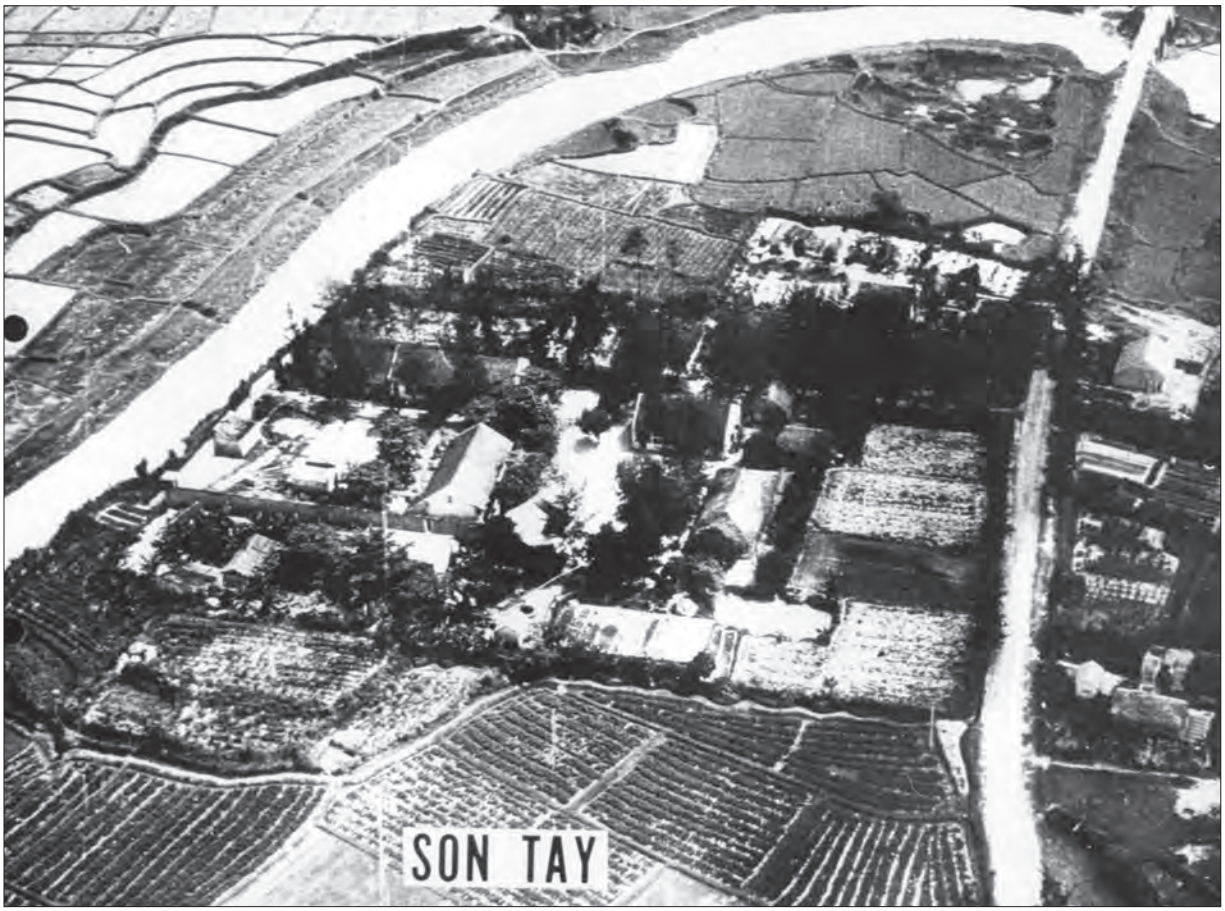
Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird discusses the failed Son Tay rescue attempt at a 23 November 1970 press conference. Behind him, left to right, are Army Colonel Arthur D. Simons, leader of the special operations team; Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff; and Air Force Brigadier General Leroy J. Manor, Commander U.S. Air Force Special Operations Force.



OSD History Collection

of each other's whereabouts since separated four days after their capture in 1966.

Unity occupied center stage for the remainder of the POW story in the North, though the Vietnamese periodically sequestered troublemakers in other parts of Hoa Lo or shuffled them off to other satellite camps that remained open. Plantation and Skid Row, along with two lesser follow-on installations the POWs called "Rockpile" and "K-49," continued to quarter Americans who had come up from the South, and the Zoo continued to serve as a repository for new shootdowns. With the resumption of U.S. bombing strikes late in 1971, air crewmen entered the system in significant numbers for the first time in three years. Unexpectedly, and in an apparent reversal of the policy instituted in the wake of the Son Tay raid, in the spring of 1972, prison authorities sent about half of the Unity POWs, 210



OSD Historical Collection

Son Tay prison, located about 22 miles northwest of Hanoi.

Prisoner of War Camps in North Vietnam

Camp	Location	Dates of Operation
Bao Cao (Portholes)	Near Vinh	Sep 67–28 Aug 68
Bang Liet (Skid Row, Hughey, K-77)	5 miles Southwest of Hanoi	7 Jul 68–1 Jan 72
Citadel (Plantation)	North Central Hanoi	6 Jun 67–16 Mar 73
Cu Loc (Zoo)	Southwest suburb of Hanoi	20 Sep 65–29 Mar 73
Annex		19 Oct 67–24 Aug 70
Dan Hoi (Faith)	9 miles Northwest of Hanoi	14 Jul 70–24 Nov 70
Duong Ke (Farnsworth, D-1)	18 miles Southwest of Hanoi	29 Aug 68–25 Nov 70
Hoa Lo (Hanoi Hilton)	Central Hanoi	11 Aug 64–28 Mar 73
Heartbreak		(open throughout)
New Guy Village		(open throughout)
Vegas		26 Jan 67–5 Mar 73
Unity		24 Nov 70–4 Mar 73
Loung Lang (Dogpatch)	105 miles Northeast of Hanoi	14 May 72–31 Jan 73
Ministry of National Defense (Alcatraz)	North Central Hanoi	25 Oct 67–17 Aug 70
Mountain Camp (K-49)	50 miles North of Hanoi	12 Dec 71–28 Jan 73
Noi Coc (Rockpile, Stonewall)	30 miles South of Hanoi	21 Jun 71–14 Feb 73
Power Plant (Dirty Bird)	Northern Hanoi	25 Jun 67–25 Oct 67
Son Tay (Hope)	22 miles Northwest of Hanoi	23 May 68–14 Jul 70
Xom Ap Lo (Briarpatch)	35 miles West of Hanoi	31 Aug 65–2 Feb 67
		5 Feb 71–9 Jul 71
Xom De (Countryside)	1 mile Southeast of Hanoi	16 Jan 73–6 Feb 73

From OSD Historical Collection

men, to a new maximum security facility only nine miles from the Chinese border. It is likely the North Vietnamese took this step because of the revived air activity over Hanoi and second thoughts over stashing all their prizes in one place in the event of a U.S. invasion of the capital. "Dogpatch," which one of the prisoners said had "all the qualities of a dungeon except that it was not underground," lacked radio, electricity, or an infirmary. It was here that John Frederick suffered his fatal bout of typhoid fever; the Vietnamese evacuated the brawny Marine to a hospital in Hanoi but too late to save him.

The massive 1972 "Linebacker" strikes on previously prohibited targets added scores of new names to the Northern POW roster. As naval aircraft bombed reinforced enemy air defense positions in advance of B-52 attacks on Hanoi and Haiphong, both the Navy and Air Force suffered major losses. Over a hundred U.S. military personnel were captured during 1972, all but a dozen of them aviators. Navy personnel accounted for more than two dozen of those taken into custody. At the height of the offensive, during Christmas 1972, the enemy shot down 15 B-52s, along with seven other U.S. planes; 44 airmen joined their colleagues in Hanoi in Unity or the Zoo. John McCain called the day and night strikes on Hanoi, the first involving the use of B-52s over the capital, "the most spectacular show I'll ever see." The POWs at Hoa Lo were both exhilarated and nervous from the thunderous assault that lit up the sky and rattled their cells.

The last Navy casualty of the Christmas operation, and the last pilot captured over the North, was Lieutenant Commander Alfred Agnew, on 28 December. The last Navy POW of the Vietnam War, and the last American taken prisoner before the conclusion of a truce and cease-fire, was Lieutenant Commander Phillip Kientzler whose plane went down just south of the Demilitarized Zone. He was seized on 27 January 1973, the same day the peace treaty was signed in Paris. By then, the North Vietnamese had shuttered Dogpatch and the other satellite prisons outside Hanoi and gathered the main body of U.S. POWs for repatriation processing in Unity and next door in Vegas, where the interior

NHHC Artifact Collection

Toiletries.


NHHC Artifact Collection

Tin cup issued to prisoners.

walls had been dismantled to make more room. Two other blocks of prisoners, who would be the last to leave, were assembled at Plantation and the Zoo. Over the next two months, during February and March, 591 Americans, 164 Navy and Marine Corps personnel among them, were freed roughly according to their capture dates. All departed with their U.S. escorts from Hanoi's Gia Lam airfield save for two releases from Communist China and 28 captives of the Viet Cong who had been held too far south to be transported into the North (the only southern prisoners not to be shipped across the DMZ during the course of the war) and who were released in South Vietnam. ⚓

Code of Conduct

I

I am an American, fighting in the forces which guard my country and our way of life.
I am prepared to give my life in their defense.

II

I will never surrender of my own free will.
If in command, I will never surrender the members of my command while they still have the means to resist.

III

If I am captured I will continue to resist by all means available. I will make every effort to escape and to aid others to escape.
I will accept neither parole nor special favors from the enemy.

IV

If I become a prisoner of war, I will keep faith with my fellow prisoners. I will give no information or take part in any action which might be harmful to my comrades. If I am senior, I will take command. If not, I will obey the lawful orders of those appointed over me and will back them up in every way.

V

When questioned, should I become a prisoner of war, I am required to give name, rank, service number, and date of birth. I will evade answering further questions to the utmost of my ability. I will make no oral or written statements disloyal to my country and its allies or harmful to their cause.

VI

I will never forget that I am an American, fighting for freedom, responsible for my actions, and dedicated to the principles which made my country free. I will trust in my God and in the United States of America.

At the start of the Vietnam War, the training of U.S. military personnel stressed steadfast resistance in the event of capture—a strict code of conduct deemed necessary to maintain discipline and enhance survival. The code evolved out of the Korean War experience where there had been a breakdown of morale and discipline among American prisoners and widespread allegations of "brainwashing" and collaboration. Under the Armed Forces Code of Conduct issued by executive order in August 1955, a captured serviceman was required when interrogated to give only name, rank, service number, and date of birth; to resist further demands by all means available; to make every effort to escape; and to provide no information or statement harmful to comrades or country. Adherence to the post-Korea code by U.S. prisoners of the Vietnam War presented its own challenges and controversy. This was particularly true in North Vietnam, from which escape was almost impossible, where recurring torture rendered the rules increasingly untenable, and yet where a high percentage of the prisoners were officers who by profession and training were imbued with a deep-seated commitment to abide by the Code as a matter of honor and duty.

Over the years each of the services had developed its own Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape (SERE) program to prepare members for the captivity situation, including Code of Conduct instruction. The Navy's program originally focused narrowly on "evasion and escape," but by 1962 the Pacific Fleet command recognized the need for more comprehensive guidance and an emphasis also on survival and resistance to interrogation, with specific reference to guerrilla conflicts such as those occurring in Indochina, where conventional prisoner of war circumstances and protections did not apply. In August 1964, the Chief of Naval Operations issued a new instruction that cited the need for intensified training especially for those personnel whose assignments rendered them most susceptible to capture.

Navy SERE training took place principally at Brunswick, Maine; Whidbey Island, Washington; and North Island, San Diego; Marine Corps training, at Cherry Point, North Carolina. Commander James Stockdale remembered attending survival school at North Island, spending a week in the wilds learning how to evade and avoid capture and a week in a mock prison compound learning resistance techniques and how to set up a chain of command. He was placed in tiny black punishment boxes and slapped around by Communist-uniformed instructors. Stockdale recalled the training as "realistic" but creating the false impression that the ordeal "all happened in the first month or two, and that 'if you hang tough' . . . the jailers will put you aside as a waste of their time and leave you alone." Jerry Coffee took his instruction at Brunswick in southeast Maine where he found the teaching of resistance principles helpful but the simulation of conditions there only faintly preparing him for the rigors of North Vietnam. Most men, including Commanders Kenneth Coskey and James Bell, found the training beneficial but useful only up to a point, owing to the limited duration of the course and the limits of simulated terror and abuse, however realistic, in a classroom situation. "I had the best of survival training in the navy," observed Commander Howard Rutledge, an early capture who paid for his disobedience with regular visits to the correction chamber and prolonged isolation. "It got me through that first long day of interrogation. But after that I was alone, and no survival training can prepare a man for years of solitary confinement."

In fact, even as SERE training became more sophisticated—later captures increasingly testified to its value—few of the Navy and Marine personnel or their fellow aviators were prepared for what awaited them at Hoa Lo and in the other northern prisons. Out of necessity, the pilots had to refine

or improvise survival and resistance techniques even at the risk of compromising the letter of the Code. Complicating their predicament was a lack of clarity or consensus on how to apply the Code's commandments when an individual was confronted with the prospect of loss of life or limb. To a degree, Code of Conduct doctrine—and consequently SERE training—varied among the services. For instance, the Air Force allowed greater latitude toward enemy interrogation and the prohibition against going beyond the "Big Four." The Navy and Marine Corps adhered to a stricter interpretation of the Code's commandments. The Navy reaffirmed its guidance after Lieutenant Charles Klusmann's escape from Laos and the revelation that, under the influence of the Air Force interpretation, he had composed 10 letters for his captors during his confinement.

The conflicting guidelines contributed to dissension in the POW organization and prisoner guilt and uncertainty. The men were unsure what course to follow regarding interrogation, escape, acts of submission such as bowing, and whether a prisoner should accept early release if offered. Denton later told an interviewer there were "a myriad of issues, such as whether or not to accept a cup of tea or . . . a banana when you didn't know whether the other guy did." The differences of opinion and confusion, both at the Pentagon and in the POW camps, would not get sorted out and resolved until the end of the war, and even then not definitively. (Considerable debate also surrounded the Code's application to the crew of USS *Pueblo* (AGER 2) seized by North Korean forces in January 1968; conduct at their capture and during a subsequent 11-month detention raised further questions about appropriate conduct under the Code.) The two highest-ranking Navy officers among the American POWs in Southeast Asia, Commanders Stockdale and Denton, disagreed over what constituted an acceptable threshold of compliance under torture and other extreme enemy pressure. Denton opted for a hard-line approach and Stockdale, for a more flexible, pragmatic policy based on principled resistance but common-sense judgment. A set of guidelines Stockdale issued under the acronym BACK US ultimately prevailed:

Prisoners were forced to utter "Bao Cao" and bow before their captors when seeking permission to speak. Artist John M. McGrath, a Navy lieutenant when he became a POW in North Vietnam on 30 June 1967, sketched a series of vignettes on prison life upon his return home in 1973. Reprinted by permission from his memoir, *Prisoner of War: Six Years in Hanoi* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1975).

B—Bowing. Do not bow in public, either under camera surveillance or where nonprison observers were present.

A—Air. Stay off the air. Make no broadcasts or recordings.

C—Crimes. Admit to no "crimes," avoiding use of the word in coerced confessions.

K—Kiss. Do not kiss the Vietnamese goodbye, meaning show no gratitude, upon release.

US—Unity over Self.

The BACK US instruction, like other policies and orders promulgated by the senior officers, got disseminated throughout the prisoner ranks, first within Hoa Lo and then elsewhere as inmates were transferred from the main prison.

The POWs transmitted the information through an elaborate communication system that became the foundation of the resistance in the North. Almost from the start, the POWs felt the need and found a way to communicate with fellow

captives, both as a tonic for morale and to compare notes and gather knowledge about their captors. The second American taken into custody by the North Vietnamese, Navy Lieutenant Commander Robert Shumaker, seized on 11 February 1965, upon spotting the arrival of other prisoners in the New Guy section of Hoa Lo, stashed notes where the men emptied their waste buckets. Shumaker knew that guards seldom entered the latrine area because of the terrible odor. Soon the names of naval aviators Ray Vohden and Phil Butler along with those of several early Air Force captures appeared on the handles of food pails and the undersides of plates. A communications network began to take shape. However, the note system was difficult and time-consuming and, like voice contact, risked compromise. The most effective technique, and the one which became the most commonly used by American prisoners in the North, was the tap code. Through this method, the POWs could transmit messages quickly and covertly. Based on a rotating matrix, the code could be continually altered to prevent detection.

Over time the prisoners devised ingenious variations on the tap principle, developing alternative and backup methods to keep the enemy guessing and to create new options when they were outdoors or normal channels were closed. POWs on cleanup duty used brooms to "sweep" information in code. Denton introduced a "vocal" form of the code that employed coughs and sneezes and proved particularly effective when harsh winter weather and respiratory problems had cellblocks resonating naturally, without suspicion, like tuberculosis wards. To amplify sound when tapping, men pressed their tin drinking cups against adjoining cell walls. Coffee recalled that even in the Vegas compound, where the Vietnamese had tried to separate rooms to stymie communication, the POWs took advantage of their guards' siesta period to make contact. They tapped so profusely that the place "sounded like a cabinet factory," with so much noise "it was sometimes difficult to maintain your own communications link." Occasionally, the prisoners supplemented the tap code with hand signals derived from sign language or Morse code, the latter used sparingly because it required a consistent hand to avoid misunderstanding and, being internationally recognized, could be deciphered by the enemy. The Vietnamese tried for years to deter contacts by punishing violators, sometimes shutting down the system, but they could not silence the Americans. Lieutenant Commander Doremus wrote in his memoir:

> We had been caught talking, tapping on the walls, handsignalling, making noises with most anything and variations of each method. Someone even disconnected one of their propaganda speakers and made static with the open leads which we could read and understand. The guards caught him and he suffered the consequences for it. Notes were intercepted; signals were understood by the camp authorities. But as we lost one round, we would shift to a new method. Sometimes the new method was better. Sometimes we had to lay low and proceed with caution. But sooner or later we would be in touch again.

The ongoing debates in Washington over the use of air power versus diplomatic initiatives led those in North Vietnam to doubt Washington's resolve. Communication served to boost morale and combat loneliness, delivering much needed encouragement and companionship, but it also supplied vital practical information that made possible organized resistance in the northern prisons. While prisoners cherished even moments of idle conversation, a functioning communication system allowed them to exchange coping tips, share observations on a particular camp's personnel and procedures, and learn from one another how to outwit interrogators or guards. Of special importance, communication enabled the POWs to compile the names and numbers of comrades in captivity and to ascertain their place in the chain of command. With ongoing shuffles between cells and between camps and prolonged periods when the Vietnamese would keep senior leaders isolated, it was often difficult to identify and locate the senior-ranking officer (SRO). At length, however, the POWs were able to establish a rough chain of command at

each camp, with the SRO coordinating tactics and strategy and conveying orders and instructions.

Determining seniority was itself a complicated process. New captures arrived daily, some with word of promotions of men already incarcerated. It was almost impossible to determine the effective date of those promotions without access to formal roster sheets. The vague lines of authority and overlapping ranks of Navy and Air Force seniors occasionally produced friction. The pilots in the North, however, were lucky to have leaders of high personal integrity as well as exceptional ability and experience who placed cooperation and solidarity above ego and service parochialism. Denton relinquished authority to Stockdale though the latter was senior to him "by a mere matter of class standing . . . a few numbers in the book." Stockdale willingly deferred to Denton when recuperating from punishment or "boxed in" and in no position to command. Later both men would defer to a quartet of higher-ranking Air Force colonels whom they recognized as senior-most among the POWs in Hanoi. To protect their identities, the SROs assumed code names: Denton was "Wildcat"; Stockdale, "Chester," after the gimpy character in the TV show "Gunsmoke" (Stockdale sustained a crippling knee injury when shot down, exacerbated at capture and by subsequent beatings that left him a cripple for much of his imprisonment); the overall senior, Air Force Col. John Flynn, went initially by "Sky" and then "Ace."

With a few exceptions, the seniors led not only by virtue of rank but by example. Because of their propaganda value as notable captures, they instantly became targets of exploitation. They were dragged before the media and pressured to make scripted statements condemning the U.S. intervention. For three consecutive days and nights in May 1966, forced to go without sleep, Denton was drilled intensively on the "truth" about the war and then taken for interviews with foreign reporters. With cameras rolling, he blinked against the glare of floodlights in calculated movements that spelled "TORTURE" in Morse code, a message picked up by U.S. Naval Intelligence that provided the first indication the American prisoners were being abused. At Vegas, Stockdale took enormous punishment rather than divulge the names of his principal lieutenants in the communications system. In one instance, he slashed his wrists and was "ready to die" to avoid giving up key information. To thwart the enemy's plan to depict him in a compromising pose, he disfigured himself. He cut his hair and scalp and, when the Vietnamese then got him a hat, pounded his face against the wall until he was unfit to be photographed or filmed, "freshening" his bruises with his fists to keep his eyelids and cheeks swollen. Navy Commander Robert Byron Fuller, despite suffering two shoulder dislocations and multiple fractures upon ejection from his aircraft, resisted heroically under repeated torture as his handlers tried to pry loose data on his carrier's capabilities. Banished to solitary for more than two years, he was one commander who had little opportunity to lead but who set a magnificent example for the few men who knew what he had gone through. William Lawrence and Ernest "Mel" Moore were other Navy commanders who enjoyed great respect among both their peers and subordinates, as did the aforementioned Mulligan, Rutledge, Harry Jenkins, Wendy Rivers, and Fred Franke.

Maintaining the semblance of a command structure when under constant surveillance and threat of reprisal required individuals to take great risks. The senior officers would not have been so successful were it not for the courage of several key junior officers. Typically with less supervision and more freedom of action than their superiors, these officers became important cogs in the resistance organization. They transmitted the higher-echelon's orders and functioned as executive assistants keeping track of policy and personnel matters. Stockdale singled out Lieutenant (jg) Danny Glenn, his young roommate in Vegas, as a tough resister and reliable "sounding board" as the commander formulated policy. Glenn, Nels Tanner, and Lieutenant James Connell were among those who paid a terrible price working for the leadership when their activities were discovered by prison officials. Connell had faked a disability in order to avoid writing propaganda statements. Thinking him disabled, the Vietnamese

The Tap Code

AS A SECRET MEANS of communication, the so-called tap code used by American prisoners during the Vietnam War had antecedents dating at least as far back as the nineteenth century. An early form of the concept appears in the 1846 novel *The Count of Monte Cristo* and may have been used during the American Civil War. POWs also employed tap communication in World War II and Korea. Navy Lieutenant Edward Davis later claimed to have introduced inmates in Hanoi to a version he learned while watching the film "The Birdman of Alcatraz." But the method that became most widely used by the U.S. prisoners in North Vietnam is usually credited to Air Force Captain Carlyle "Smitty" Harris. He proposed the idea soon after joining a half-dozen other Americans at Hoa Lo in the summer of 1965.

A prisoner uses the tap code. Drawing by John M. McGrath, reprinted by permission from his memoir published by Naval Institute Press, 1975.

Harris remembered that when he was in survival training at Stead Air Force Base, Nevada, an instructor showed him a code based upon a five-by-five matrix of the alphabet. By dropping K from the alphabet, one arranged the 25 letters as follows:

Tap Code

	1	2	3	4	5
1	A	B	C	D	E
2	F	G	H	I	J
3	L	M	N	O	P
4	Q	R	S	T	U
5	V	W	X	Y	Z

** K is not used*

Prisoners used their drinking cups and the tap code to communicate with one another through the walls of their cells. The communicator transmitted a letter by using two numbers, the first referring to the letter's location in the horizontal rows of the matrix, and the second placing it in the vertical columns. For example, 2-2 signified G; 1-2, B; 4-5, U. The sequence GBU, an abbreviation for "God Bless You," became one of the most frequently passed messages at Hoa Lo and eventually the universal sign-off signal. A famous if inelegant early transmission that used C to denote both C and K was "Joan Baez Succs," sent after the Vietnamese played a recording over the prison's public address system by the well-known American antiwar activist.

With practice, as the prisoners developed familiar abbreviations and long messages could be reduced to shorthand, the tap code had the capacity to deliver a virtual newspaper. Newcomers were often puzzled by the tappings on their wall until they gradually became initiated. Jim Mulligan, who would go on to become one of the most skillful tappers in the POW community, recalled it was slow going in the beginning, and mastering the process "was like learning the multiplication tables." So proficient became Navy Lieutenant Commander Nels Tanner that he circulated a series of Stockdale instructions comprising some 5,000 words. He tapped for several hours on both the right and left walls of his cell, passing the messages along the cellblock in both directions before retiring for the night with a final "GN"—Good Night—to Stockdale. To prevent the North Vietnamese from solving the code, the POWs occasionally rearranged the matrix, scrambling the letters in ways that became so sophisticated that experts at the Defense Intelligence Agency had trouble decoding some of the samples the returnees brought back at homecoming. ⚓

DPMO Files

Lieutenant Commander Richard A. Stratton, right, and Lieutenant Commander Hugh A. Stafford, senior officers at the Plantation camp.

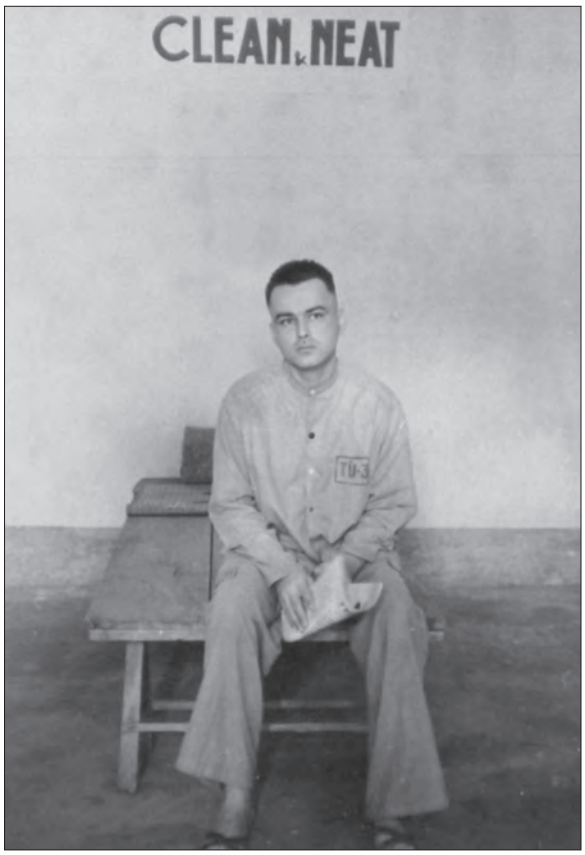
put him in a less secure cell that was strategically located near the main entrance to the Zoo. Alvarez described Connell as "uniquely brave" and "the self-appointed nerve center of our communications network . . . like a sentry, keeping a watchful eye on all movements in and out of the Zoo." Another colleague said, "he had a remarkable memory. We could pass to him as many as twenty-eight to thirty messages a day by brooms, hand signals, and even coughs whenever we came anywhere near his building. And he would remember them all. In turn, he would pass this information on through notes he placed under his toilet bowl." The ranking senior at the Zoo, Air Force Major Lawrence Guarino, lauded him as "my worldwide connection." It was fortunate that Connell's deeds became known through the acknowledgments of grateful comrades, since he died when the Vietnamese discovered his deception and brutally beat him.

Plantation, with relatively few high-ranking officers and the SRO Lieutenant Commander Stratton tarnished by the January 1967 bowing episode (though his leadership and subsequent conduct eventually earned him vindication), benefited from the grit and resourcefulness of several junior naval officers who obstructed Communist efforts to manufacture propaganda at the show camp. Lieutenant Paul Galanti, placed on a white-sheeted bed in one of the facility's sanitized cells for the filming of a sham documentary, flashed a middle finger that was only belatedly noticed by the Vietnamese and caused them considerable embarrassment. Lieutenant Commander John McCain, though seriously ill and in terrible pain from his shootdown injuries, diverted interrogators with useless information, at one point rattling off the offensive line of the Green Bay Packers football team as the members of his squadron. His fourth day in Hanoi, Lieutenant Commander Hugh Allen Stafford tried to hang himself when he thought he had violated the Code of Conduct by succumbing to questioning under torture; Stafford survived when the improvised noose failed. He went on to become a spark plug in the organization and a valued deputy to Stratton. Stratton relied on Lieutenant Commander Arvin Chauncey, an expert tapper with "great ears and fine hands," to relay his directives; when Chauncey's knuckles became raw from pounding the wall, he switched to a nail, which he handled like a telegraph key. Perhaps the most improbable case of a subordinate rising to the occasion involved an enlisted man, Douglas Hegdahl, who became a major asset to the POW command at Plantation and indeed, upon his early release, to the U.S. government in its effort to dramatize the plight of the American prisoners.

A well-coordinated, effectively linked resistance organization, no more than a dependable communication system, did not develop overnight. Even after Stockdale's rules were circulated and a firm command setup put in place, the prisoners often found themselves in one-on-one situations

with interrogators or enforcers in which they were left to their own devices. They had to fall back on their wits and instincts to counter the enemy's attempts to exploit them. The fresh arrivals at Plantation, some thrown into the propaganda mill within hours of their capture, before they were integrated into the organizational loop and taught the tap code, were a case in point. Some of the most inspired displays of impromptu resistance—using tactics that may have been suggested in SERE training but, by most accounts, were uncoached and spontaneous responses under the pressure of the moment—occurred during the first visit to the interrogation room. In a ruse that became legendary in POW lore, Tanner and his backseater, Lieutenant Ross Terry, got off the hook at their initial torture session by "confessing" that fellow carrier pilots Lieutenant Commander Ben Casey and Lieutenant Clark Kent had been court-martialed for refusing to fly their missions. Not only did the Vietnamese excitedly accept the claim, but they then had the aviators repeat the story in a televised interview with a Japanese journalist. Only when excerpts of the interview aired in the West, to howls of amusement, did Hanoi realize its blunder. As a result, Tanner spent a record 123 days in irons.

The contest often became as much a battle of wits as a test of wills. When forced to tape incriminating statements or pay tribute to the captor over the camp radio, prisoners ludicrously mispronounced names (Ho Chi Minh became "Horseshit Minh;" the Australian Communist Wilfred Burchett, "Wellfed Bullshit"), resorted to gibberish, and affected heavy Southern, German, or British accents that had long-suffering colleagues hurting from laughter. One prankster inserted into his coerced confession a reference to "the great Latin American humanitarian S. P. de Gonzalez" (spoken on tape, the name sounded like "Speedy Gonzalez"). Winning a round with imagination and humor allowed the POWs to savor small victories and gain a sense of control. Stockdale worried that such freelancing, however satisfying and entertaining, undermined discipline and ranged unacceptably and dangerously far from the sanctioned limits of the



DPMO Files

Lieutenant Paul Galanti under the "Clean & Neat" sign in a whitewashed cell at Plantation.

Code's "Big Four" requirement and, unless reined in, could have adverse consequences for the individual and the organization. Once engaged in an exchange with the enemy, even the most adroit resister could get caught in contradictions or inadvertently supply useful information to his inquisitor. The BACK US policy guidance, which included the instruction to "stay off the air," was intended in part to discourage such extemporization.

Over the course of a decade, what had begun as a fragile, easily disrupted chain of command evolved into a resilient, well-oiled resistance machine with multiple layers of authority, redundant channels of communication, and better understood if never crystal-clear rules of conduct. The primitive organization Stockdale, Denton, and Air Force seniors Risner and Guarino launched at the outset of the captivity Denton described as "skeletal but effective. What it lacked in sophistication it made up for in

The Most Extraordinary POW in North Vietnam

OSD History Collection

Seaman Apprentice Douglas B. Hegdahl on cleanup detail at Plantation.

JOURNALIST JOHN HUBBELL went so far as to call Seaman Apprentice Douglas Hegdahl "one of the most remarkable characters in American military annals." Geoffrey Norman, author of *Bouncing Back*, rated him "in many ways, the most extraordinary POW in North Vietnam." The subject of such renown was a self-effacing, unprepossessing 19-year-old South Dakotan who had been in the Navy less than six months when he was captured in the predawn hours of 6 April 1967. The youngest U.S. prisoner seized in the North, Hegdahl, according to Hubbell, prior to joining the service had never "been east of his uncle's Dairy Queen stand in Glenwood, Minnesota, or west of his aunt's house in Phoenix, Arizona." On the morning of his capture, he was serving as an ammunition handler below deck on the guided missile cruiser USS *Canberra* (CAG 2) in the Gulf of Tonkin. Eager to witness a night bombardment, he went topside without authorization and was knocked overboard by the concussion of the ship's giant guns. A powerful swimmer, he stayed afloat for several hours before being picked up by North Vietnamese fishermen and turned over to militiamen. *Canberra* reversed course when his absence was discovered but failed to locate him. A memorial service was held aboard the cruiser even as he was being trucked to Hoa Lo.

When Hegdahl explained to interrogators in Hanoi that he had fallen off a ship, they thought it so preposterous they first suspected him of concocting the tale in order to conceal his real mission as a spy. After several days of being grilled and slapped around, he convinced officials that he was in fact what he appeared to be, not a special agent, not a pilot, not even an officer, but an enlisted man and raw recruit who, having lost his glasses in the incident at sea, even had trouble seeing. Over six feet tall and weighing 225 pounds, he lumbered about the Plantation compound like a gawky innocent, when in reality he was smart and alert. When the prison staff began treating him as a genial oaf, he played the bumpkin role to the hilt, capitalizing on the disarming guise to gain extra communication opportunities and time outdoors. In the process, he became a valuable reconnaissance operative and "mailman" in the POW network.

The senior officer at Plantation, Lieutenant Commander Richard Stratton, ordered a reluctant Hegdahl to accept early release when it became apparent the Vietnamese were planning one of their periodic staged liberations and looking for appropriate candidates to hand over to an arriving peace delegation. Stratton, who had roomed with Hegdahl when the two came over together from the Zoo, knew him to be clever and possessed of uncanny recall. Hegdahl could recite the Gettysburg Address forward and backward and retain the names and shootdown dates of a long list of casualties. Stratton judged him the perfect courier to deliver to Washington, unbeknownst to the enemy, a comprehensive roster of the Americans in custody at Plantation and updates on the status of hundreds of others they had learned about at the Zoo and Hoa Lo. Upon his return to the United States, Hegdahl gave a detailed accounting of captives and conditions to Naval Intelligence and (with another releasee, Navy Lieutenant Robert Frishman) briefed reporters in a wide-ranging disclosure of Hanoi's neglect and mistreatment of the American prisoners that discredited the Communists' "humane and lenient" claim. Getting the story out became a personal crusade for Hegdahl and, after leaving the service, he toured the country and abroad seeking to bring attention to the prisoner issue. Later, in a final irony, given his captors' dismissive attitude toward the simple farm boy, he would become a civilian instructor in the Navy's SERE school in California. ⚓

OSD History Collection

Hegdahl, after his release from captivity, at a 1972 meeting of the National League of Families.

steel." But it took years of struggle and a far more favorable command environment to achieve the level of organization that Colonel Flynn presided over at Unity after 1970. Along the way, corollaries to or modifications of the BACK US guidance addressed changing or special circumstances. One issue never truly resolved was the escape mandate, so unrealistic in the North that the seniors, though never taking an official collective position on the matter, regularly advised against it, in part because of the dire repercussions for those left behind. Only a handful of the northern prisoners were brazen enough to try, none successfully.

The closest any Navy or Marine POW came was Lieutenant George Coker, a square-built former wrestler whom Stockdale likened in appearance and manner to the actor James Cagney. With an enterprising plan and an equally daring partner, Air Force Captain George McKnight, in October 1967 Coker made his way over the wall at Dirty Bird and followed a route to the nearby Red River, hoping to steal a boat and ride the current into the Gulf of Tonkin where they might with luck flag down a vessel from the U.S. Seventh Fleet. The scheme failed when the two were spotted along the shore the morning after their getaway. They were dragged back to Hoa Lo for questioning and punishment before being returned to their cells at the power plant.

There were other reasons not to attempt escape. Red McDaniel described the "miles of jungle, the thick, cruel bush that a man would have to navigate to get out. To illustrate the nature of the land we were living in, Bill Austin killed a poisonous snake in our room one night, and in the morning when we emptied our toilet bowls, we hung it up on the fence. We watched that snake periodically through the door peephole, and in three hours it had been completely devoured by insects. Nothing was left of it—nothing. We knew the same thing could happen to us if we tried to make it 110 miles to the sea."

The massing of the prisoners and centralization of the leadership at Unity gave Colonel Flynn a degree of command and control that had never been available to the ranking senior when the POW population was more scattered. To formalize his authority, Flynn created the "Fourth Allied POW Wing." ("Fourth" derived from the fourth war of the century. "Allied" signified the inclusion of the handful of Thai and Vietnamese comrades among them.) This informal organization duplicated as nearly as possible the military structure in a conventional theater of war, with a "headquarters staff" and an expanded hierarchy of squadron and flight commanders who were delegated responsibility for evaluation reports, awarding decorations, and other administrative duties. Adhering for the most part to Stockdale's middle ground between pragmatism and principle with regard to the Code of Conduct, Flynn, with Commander Lawrence a key deputy, issued a series of instructions under the code name "Plums." The overriding goal was embodied in the new motto, "Return With Honor."

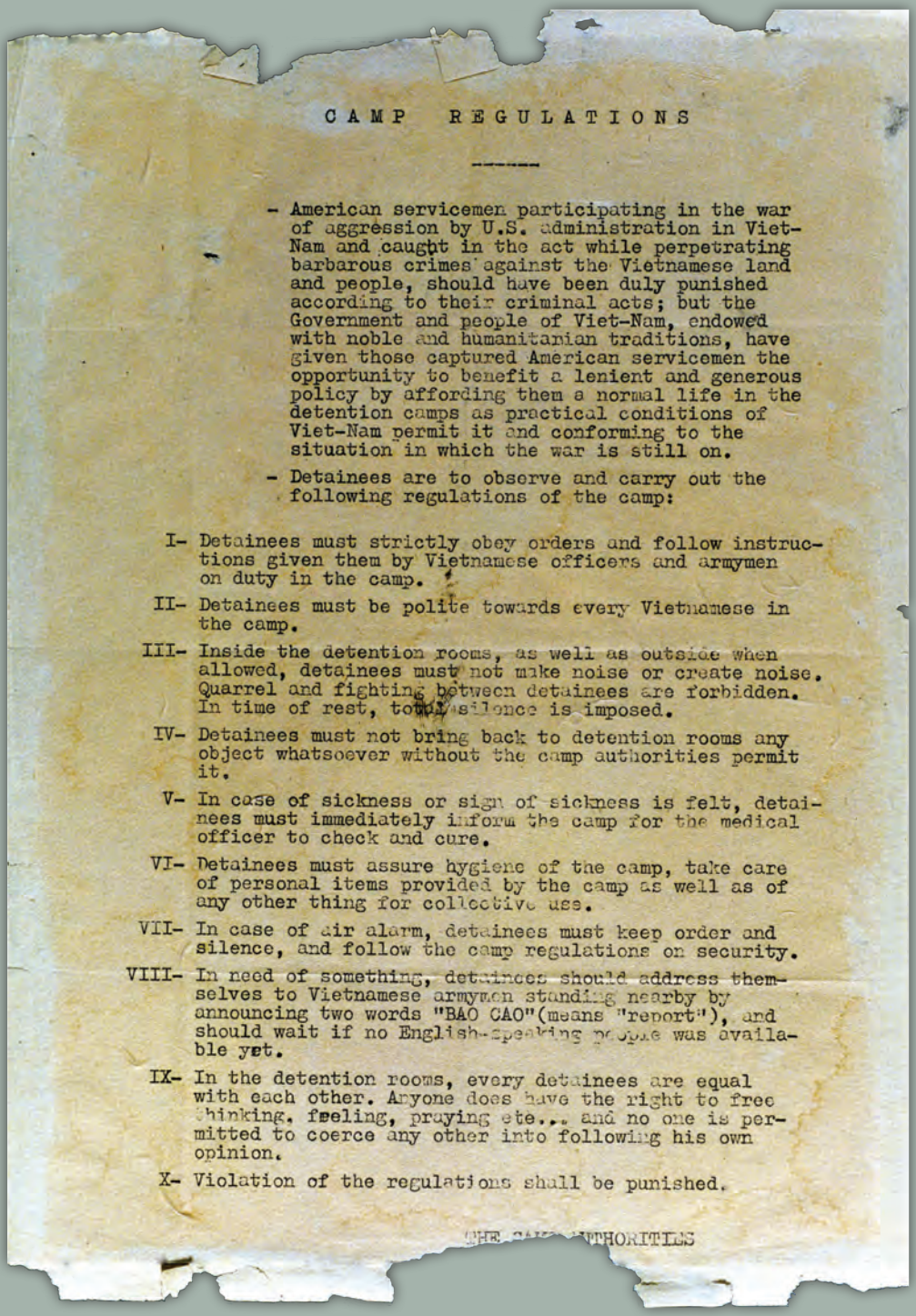
Ironically, as the leadership exercised more supervision and sought to restore norms of military behavior and protocol that had eroded in captivity, the biggest challenge was no longer the enemy but discord and objections within their own ranks. The improvement of conditions and easing of tensions after 1970 contributed to a breakdown in discipline. With the relaxation of Vietnamese pressure and a sense of emancipation, some prisoners resented what seemed to be a new tyranny of regulations. "Like the Children of Israel," Denton wrote, "we were having trouble with our own people as we neared the Promised Land and the frustrations created by years of imprisonment and torture surfaced." Veteran POWs spoiling for a fight with the enemy found the new demands for conformity and obedience from their own cadre stifling; and the "new guys," the more recent captures, not having experienced the terror of the torture era, had no appreciation for the importance in captivity of self-imposed discipline and tight-knit organization. For a time, the quarrels undermined unity and solidarity, even as the POW organization was structurally stronger than ever.

The most prominent dissidents at Unity were a trio of naval aviators who had their own notion of what the war was about and what conduct was expected of them. By all accounts, they were not just mavericks bent on doing their own thing but flagrant

transgressors thought to be collaborating with the enemy. Navy Commanders Walter Eugene Wilber and Robert Schweitzer and Marine Lieutenant Colonel Edison Miller allegedly provided uncoerced antiwar statements to the Vietnamese in return for preferential treatment. Defying repeated orders from the SRO and pleas from comrades to get back in line, Wilber and Miller (Schweitzer was coaxed back into the fold) showed no remorse and upon their return from Hanoi would be charged with serious offenses of mutiny and collaboration. Although Navy and Marine Corps officials declined to prosecute them (fearing that others who supplied statements, even if under duress, would also be found culpable), the two retired in lasting disgrace. Other Marines who upon repatriation faced court-martial proceedings for desertion or dereliction—none officers and all undoubtedly rendered vulnerable by their youth and factors peculiar to captivity in the South—were the aforementioned Private Robert Garwood, Private First Class Jon Sweeney, and three members of the so-called Peace Committee, Sergeant Abel Kavanaugh, Corporal Alfonso Riate, and Private Fred Elbert.

For all the problems defining and enforcing the Code of Conduct and despite lapses and several egregious cases of misconduct even by the loosest definition of the Code, the great majority of the U.S. prisoners of the Vietnam War, certainly among the officers in the northern camps, returned home with their honor intact. And for every instance of dishonorable conduct, it is fair to say there were a half-dozen or more of extraordinary resistance and gallantry, including the quintessential examples of Marine Medal of Honor recipient Donald Cook in the South (see sidebar on page 9) and Navy Medal of Honor recipient Stockdale in the North. Stockdale earned his medal for inspirational leadership and intrepid resistance specifically related to the September 1969 incident at Hoa Lo where he "deliberately inflicted a near-mortal wound to his person" rather than implicate comrades during an enemy communications purge.

It is impossible to study the captivity experience in Southeast Asia and not be impressed by the often epic quality of the American POWs' resistance. Still, especially among those in custody during the harrowing middle years, there were few who at one point or another did not "break" under often unbearable physical and mental suffering. Jim Mulligan later testified that the North Vietnamese managed to obtain statements from 80 percent of the American prisoners over the duration of the war. Not even the most rock-ribbed and strong-willed—not even lions like Stockdale, Denton, and McCain—could resist indefinitely if the captor turned the screws tight enough. Each individual had a different threshold of pain, but all had an eventual breaking point. Under Stockdale's and then Flynn's guidance, it was understood that sticking to the letter of the Code was the heroic ideal but not a blind imperative. In Stockdale's words, the Code of Conduct remained "the star that guided us. . . . As POW's who were treated not as POW's but as common criminals, we sailed uncharted waters. . . . The Code did not provide for our day to day existence; we wrote the laws we had to live by. . . . We [the seniors] set a line of resistance we thought was within the capability of each POW to hold, and we ruled that no man would cross that line without significant torture." The realistic objective became one of holding out as long as possible, then giving as little as possible, and using the breathing spell between torture sessions to recover strength for the next bout. Stockdale's compass set a high standard but one that was attainable; the alternative would have been a growing questioning of the worth and validity of the Code itself. Though most harbored some degree of guilt or shame at having capitulated and somehow betrayed their oath, as a group they could take satisfaction in hewing to the Code's tenets insofar as humanly possible in the face of cruel and unusual, at times inhuman, punishment. ⚓



CAMP REGULATIONS

- American servicemen participating in the war of aggression by U.S. administration in Viet-Nam and caught in the act while perpetrating barbarous crimes against the Vietnamese land and people, should have been duly punished according to their criminal acts; but the Government and people of Viet-Nam, endowed with noble and humanitarian traditions, have given those captured American servicemen the opportunity to benefit a lenient and generous policy by affording them a normal life in the detention camps as practical conditions of Viet-Nam permit it and conforming to the situation in which the war is still on.
- Detainees are to observe and carry out the following regulations of the camp:

I- Detainees must strictly obey orders and follow instructions given them by Vietnamese officers and armymen on duty in the camp.

II- Detainees must be polite towards every Vietnamese in the camp.

III- Inside the detention rooms, as well as outside when allowed, detainees must not make noise or create noise. Quarrel and fighting between detainees are forbidden. In time of rest, total silence is imposed.

IV- Detainees must not bring back to detention rooms any object whatsoever without the camp authorities permit it.

V- In case of sickness or sign of sickness is felt, detainees must immediately inform the camp for the medical officer to check and cure.

VI- Detainees must assure hygiene of the camp, take care of personal items provided by the camp as well as of any other thing for collective use.

VII- In case of air alarm, detainees must keep order and silence, and follow the camp regulations on security.

VIII- In need of something, detainees should address themselves to Vietnamese armymen standing nearby by announcing two words "BAO CAO"(means "report"), and should wait if no English-speaking people was available yet.

IX- In the detention rooms, every detainees are equal with each other. Anyone does have the right to free thinking, feeling, praying etc... and no one is permitted to coerce any other into following his own opinion.

X- Violation of the regulations shall be punished.

THE CAMP AUTHORITIES

OSD History Collection

A copy of camp regulations posted at the Zoo POW camp was smuggled out of North Vietnam by a released American prisoner in March 1973.

PUNISHMENT

Beginning in the fall of 1965, as North Vietnamese prison authorities became aware of the extent of covert communication and other clandestine activity among their first batch of American prisoners, and as they came under increasing pressure to obtain information and statements that could be used for propaganda purposes, they recognized the need to tighten control and subdue the POW resistance in its early stages. They began with a set of regulations posted in each cell, ordering the prisoners to cooperate with interrogators, obey all guard instructions, and attempt no communication. Penalties for violations gradually escalated from withholding or delaying meals to occasional resort to "slaps and cuffs" to, when persuasion and harassment failed, brute coercion. Before long, torture, as both an instrument of punishment and a means for extracting information, became a standard procedure.

Navy Lieutenant (jg) Rodney Knutson, a radar intercept operator captured with pilot Ralph Gaither when their F-4 went down on 17 October 1965, became the first victim of the stricter regime when he refused to respond to questioning or sign a confession of criminal wrongdoing. At the direction of superiors, guards locked him in ankle straps and bound his arms so tightly behind his back they lost circulation. They denied him food and water and, when he still refused to submit, punched him with clenched fists until they shattered his nose, broke several teeth, and caused his eyelids to swell shut. When after three days his assaulters removed him from the stocks, he was unable to straighten up because his bloodied back and buttocks, beaten to a pulp with bamboo clubs, had formed a giant scab. As the men released his bonds, the recirculation of blood into his blackened hands and forearms inflicted another dose of intense pain—a kind of double jeopardy both going into and coming out of the constraints that a recalcitrant subject came to know intimately. When, semiconscious and writhing in agony, he remained silent, the Vietnamese applied a new torture that finally broke him.

In the so-called rope torture, administered to Knutson on 25 October and soon to become a source of dread throughout the northern camps, his handlers forced him face down on his bunk, set his ankles into stocks, and bound him tightly with rope at the elbows. The long end of the rope was then pulled up through a hook attached to the ceiling. As one of the men hoisted the prisoner, he lifted him off the bunk enough so that he could not relieve any of his weight, producing incredible pain—with shoulders seemingly torn from their sockets—and horribly constricted breathing. (In an alternate technique the enemy placed the prisoner on his bunk or the floor, arched his back with a rope stretching from the feet to the throat, and placed pressure on the back until the victim's mouth was practically touching his toes.) Screaming and in tears from this first use of the rope treatment, Knutson at last agreed to talk.

Knutson's ordeal became a rite of passage experienced eventually by almost every American POW in the North between the fall of 1965 and the turning point in September 1969. Returning prisoners later estimated that 95 percent of the captures prior to 1970 underwent torture of one kind or another. The techniques varied from use of the ropes to cuffs of a ratchet type that could be tightened until they penetrated the flesh, sometimes down to the bone; aggravation of injuries received at ejection or upon landing, such as twisting a broken leg; forcing a man to sit or kneel for long periods without food or sleep; beatings with fanbelt-like whips and rifle butts; the application of an assortment of straps, bars, and chains to body pressure points; and prolonged solitary confinement, often while in darkened quarters and/or in leg irons or manacles. Much of the paraphernalia had been used previously for local convicts, Asians who typically had a smaller build than the Americans. Thus

simple shackling in the undersized cuffs and irons became excruciating.

The Vietnamese developed a set routine, using room 18, in a corner of the Heartbreak section of Hoa Lo just outside New Guy Village, as the primary correction chamber. It was a large area, about 25 feet by 30 feet, with soundproofed walls (painted at first blue, then ironically a sort of ward-room green, the color the Navy frequently chose for shipboard interiors presumably for its relaxing properties) and an array of menacing contraptions, the most imposing being a giant hook suspended from the ceiling. Cattycorner to room 18, in New Guy, was a second torture room known as the "Knobby Room" for its fist-sized knobs of plaster that had the effect of blunting if not completely muffling prisoner screams. Later the Hilton's managers added another special punishment cell near Hoa Lo's kitchen the POWs called "Calcutta," where Stockdale, Lawrence, and others the enemy targeted as ringleaders spent time.

The expert technician who presided over the torture program in the early going the POWs named "Pigeye" or "Straps and Bars." Pigeye reported to Major Bai—"Cat," as the Americans referred to him. For most of the captivity, until 1969, Cat served as overall superintendent of the prison system in the North. Whether it was his decision to institute the harsh treatment, or higher authorities in the government ordered it, was never entirely clear, but Cat took a keen personal interest in the torture program and closely supervised it. Interrogator-enforcers who acquired notoriety for their cruelty or proficiency, besides Pigeye, were the jug-eared "Rabbit," "Bug," "Dum Dum," "Greasy," "Magoo," "Mole," "Spot," "Frenchy," "Mickey Mouse," "Louie the Rat," and a dozen or more other key henchmen on whom the POWs pinned derisive nicknames and who became familiar nemeses over the years. One guard who seemed to work over only Navy prisoners was christened "ONI" for Office of Naval Intelligence. In truth, there were also prison personnel, in the main professional military men, who were uncomfortable with the torture tactics and seemed themselves to have contempt for the political officers and their minions who took a sadistic pleasure in bringing the Americans to heel.

It is difficult to overstate the agony the prisoners endured at the hands of such tormentors. The enforcers' limited understanding of English, which prevented them from realizing that a prisoner was surrendering, often prolonged the ordeal. As in Knutson's case, the Vietnamese sometimes seemed satisfied merely to break the prisoner and pry loose any response at all. If a subject exhibited a "bad attitude," sparring with interrogators or refusing to abide by regulations, the enemy screwed or cinched him a notch tighter; if he complied, the concession would be used to induce yet further cooperation at a later point. Stockdale described the process as "like a ratchet on an auto jack." Colonel Flynn said at a news conference upon his return home that after repeated torture sessions the Vietnamese "knew each one of us better than we knew ourselves. . . . They brought me to the point where if they asked me to shoot my own mother, I would have."

Although the most intensive and sophisticated torture took place in Hoa Lo's specially equipped chambers, the enemy implemented the program elsewhere as well. At the Zoo, in a harbinger of worse treatment to come, in the fall of 1965 authorities abruptly curtailed not only the prisoners' rations but also bathing and latrine visits, and guards abused the men at the slightest provocation. When a jailor noticed Bob Shumaker leaning against a cell door, he accused him of attempting to escape and hauled him into a pitch-dark corner of the Zoo's "Auditorium," a building that had once housed a movie theater but now was filled with spider webs and crawling vermin and reeked with the stench of urine and excrement. The Vietnamese had constructed a punishment cell in the building with no bunk or mat and only a waste bucket that workers emptied once a day but did not clean. In this black-as-night, fetid stall, Shumaker suffered vertigo, terrible nausea, and unremitting dysentery that further befouled the room and went unrelieved for weeks. Ed Davis, Ralph Gaither, Skip Brunhaver, and Lieutenants (jg) Wendell Alcorn and William Shankel were other early shootdowns who were persecuted at the Zoo soon after capture.

Rope torture. Drawing by John M. McGrath, reprinted by permission from his memoir published by Naval Institute Press, 1975.

For their relatively short duration, Briarpatch and a small but infamous compound known as "Alcatraz" also had reputations as "bad treatment" camps. Briarpatch, with raw mountain winters, no utilities, and sanitary arrangements more primitive than the Zoo's, was a miserable enough place without mistreatment. When Gaither arrived there from the Zoo, he was among several dozen POWs waiting their turn as the prisoners "were taken in order . . . to the torture rooms. I could hear my turn coming, and feel it, as cell by cell the ominous pain moved up the hill toward me." Alcatraz, located about a mile from Hoa Lo in a courtyard behind Hanoi's Ministry of National Defense, held the same 11 prisoners for the better part of two years between 1967 and 1969. With tiny, sunken cells, no windows, and little ventilation, it was as close to a dungeon as any prison in North Vietnam and had once been used by the French to quarantine their most feared political opponents. The Vietnamese likewise sequestered there those prisoners they deemed to be among the most refractory and troublesome resisters. Eight of the 11 Americans housed at Alcatraz were Navy officers—Stockdale, Denton, Mulligan, Rutledge, Jenkins, Shumaker, Tanner, and Coker—a veritable honor roll of hard-liners and agitators the enemy marked for special surveillance and correction.

Although the enemy punished prisoners for violating regulations and sometimes for no reason at all, officials frequently used the punishment threat to achieve propaganda objectives. For a time, North Vietnam threatened to actually try captured

U.S. aviators for "war crimes." In the spring of 1966, amid widespread demonstrations on college campuses in the United States and a groundswell of antiwar activities on both sides of the Atlantic, Hanoi Radio compared U.S. bombing raids with Nazi World War II aggression and drew parallels to the Nuremberg offenses. After months of orchestrated broadcasting and polemics designed to appeal to anti-American sentiments, on 6 July 1966, prison officials gathered the POWs and paraded them through downtown Hanoi before hostile crowds. The throng pelted and kicked the men as they staggered in a column of twos along a two-mile route that ended at the city's stadium. Intended to showcase and humiliate the prisoners in a possible prelude to real or mock war crimes trials, the "Hanoi March"—replete with floodlights, television cameras, and grandstands filled with photographers and reporters—had the opposite effect of casting the Americans as victims of a thuggish mob. The embarrassing backlash caused the North Vietnamese to abandon any plan to prosecute the POWs, although they stepped up efforts to wring confessions and apologies from the pilots to buttress a tribunal organized by the British philosopher and pacifist Bertrand Russell to try U.S. leaders in absentia.

DPMO Files

Lieutenant Commander Charles Nels Tanner was one of eight Navy officers the enemy sequestered in the dungeon of "Alcatraz" as punishment for hard-line resistance.

In the months following the Hanoi March, the enemy continued to exert pressure on the POWs to obtain statements that could be used in the propaganda campaign. Alvarez, now at Briarpatch, would never forget the date 9 August 1966, "my day of infamy." In the morning, guards took him to the quiz room where they confronted him with a blank piece of paper and asked him to write. Earlier in the week he had balked at the demand, and when he again refused to budge, Bug (whom Alvarez knew as "Mr. Blue") summoned one of his hatchet men:

> I knew what was ahead and prayed I would be able to withstand it. They held my hands behind my back and closed the ratchet cuffs around my wrists, squeezing the metal to the last notch. . . . The pain was excruciating. It felt like a hacksaw had stuck deep in my flesh. The cuffs seemed to cut through to the bone. My head was pushed far forward and all I could do was yell and scream to ride with the pain. They left me alone for quarter-hour spells and then returned, yanking my arms up and squeezing the cuffs tighter yet. . . . Together they worked me over heartlessly, like a couple of kids pulling wings off flies. "Write!" they shouted as they struck with their fists and feet, knocking me off the stool, hoisting me up again and using me as a punching bag.

By mid-day, the aviator was ready to write, though it would be a few hours before he could hold a pencil, his hands "attached to the ends of . . . [his] arms like frozen gloves." It took two years for his hands to regain their natural color. At the Zoo, over a hundred residents were hauled to torture between July and December and admonished to "Make Your Choice"—to write or suffer the consequences. Wendy Rivers remembered Jim Hutton returning from an extortion session looking as if "every blood vessel in his face had been ruptured." On 8 August, Rutledge entered a pen known as the "Outhouse" for its overwhelming stench and did not leave until signing his confession on the 31st. Rutledge spent almost a month in anguish—legs in irons, hands cuffed behind his back, surrounded by "a pile of human excrement crawling with countless moving things," only a small bowl of rice to eat each day with two cups of filthy water, and so ravaged by heat, dysentery, hunger, and pain that he "could remember I had children but not how many."

Evasiveness and dissembling bought time but the penalty when exposed—as happened to Tanner following the discovery of his Ben Casey–Clark Kent charade—meant even more savage punishment. Still, it did not stop POWs from trying to sabotage confessions by inserting misspellings, using clumsy penmanship (writing in the opposite hand), or mangling the language much as was done on coerced tape recordings. Some succeeded in finding ways to alleviate punishment, as when Ed Davis devised and circulated to comrades a method to loosen and remove cuffs. Alvarez noted in his memoir that one of the best ways to prepare for interrogation in the winter was to be "overdressed," to wear both sets of their pajama shirts and trousers for extra insulation against the numbing cold of sleepless nights and extended stays in the quiz and punishment rooms. Civilian prisoner and former Marine pilot Ernest Brace taught his prison mates that they could ease their breathing when being buried upright in a hole by leaning backwards as the dirt was shoveled in.

The only real relief during the middle years came from the sporadic U.S. bombing pauses, which put the Vietnamese in a better mood and caused them to temper or suspend torture and generally relax treatment. Holidays too—both Vietnamese and American—sometimes brought welcome, if brief, respites from abuse. Even in the vicious aftermath of the Hanoi March, meals improved dramatically at Thanksgiving and Christmas, as did opportunities for bathing, shaving, and exercise; another period of remission occurred in January and February 1967 during the enemy's Tet celebration. The Vietnamese likely alternated the carrot with the stick in an effort to soften their subjects but also perhaps recognized that weakened hostages would not long survive unremitting punishment. At intervals, prison officials would inexplicably indulge one group of prisoners while hammering another to keep cellblocks guessing as to what was being exacted in return for leniency. Similarly, they manipulated the delivery and receipt of mail to sow dissension in the POW ranks as to why some men were allowed to send or receive correspondence and others were not. In a postwar interview, Denton recalled that Cat purposely differentiated treatment in the Vegas compound "to tear our morale apart."

Plantation was one of the few places thought to be a relatively "easy street" because the Communists had to keep up appearances at the show camp for the steady stream of journalists and delegations they hosted there. But even Plantation had its downside. Notwithstanding the opportunity for refreshments and contact with the outside world, sometimes with a countryman, most of the POWs dreaded the appointments with the delegations and the Hobson's choice between allowing themselves to be exploited or resisting and facing stern reprisals. In one instance, an Air Force pilot was practically drawn and quartered for a subpar performance before a visiting Women's Strike for Peace group. Still, the brunt of the torture activity continued to occur at Hoa Lo and the Zoo where, by 1967 and 1968, at the height of the torture era, the enemy brutalized indiscriminately both new arrivals and older hands, putting some of the longer-term prisoners through their third or fourth round in the ropes.

To shut down the communication system at Vegas, in 1967 Cat brought in additional guards

Indoctrination: Torturing the Mind

THE CONCEPT OF CONVERTING PRISONERS to one's cause through political education and psychological manipulation has a long history dating back centuries, the most familiar example in recent history being the systematic use of indoctrination techniques by Chinese Communists during the Korean War. Although Vietnamese Communists never adopted the most extreme Chinese methods and were sensitive to accusations of "brainwashing" given the notoriety of the Chinese program, indoctrination became a central element of their POW operations, and they borrowed freely from their ideological mentors. Attesting the importance they attached to the function, most of the prison camps in North Vietnam had two "commanders," one the nominal camp commander, who was a regular army officer responsible for routine administrative matters such as maintenance and supply, and the other the camp's chief "political officer," who represented the political department in Hanoi and was in charge of indoctrination and interrogation associated with political objectives.

Most of the aviators received their first dose of indoctrination with their initial interrogation at the Hanoi Hilton. The instructor informed the new prisoner that he was a criminal, perhaps the unthinking agent of his government but a transgressor nonetheless, the latest in a long line of Indochina invaders and colonialists. The set piece went on to extol the virtues of communism, denounce the Saigon government as a stooge for U.S. interests as it had been for the French, and indict American society as controlled by the rich and powerful. Zealous as their instructors were, the prisoners were convinced that the Vietnamese were trying not so much to "convert" them per se as to instill certain precepts that, through constant drill and repetition, would become a part of their own mindset and vocabulary. Whether they accepted the cant or not, the POWs could soon recite it chapter and verse, parroting Communist slogans and doctrines when physically compelled.

In the South in particular, where black servicemen comprised a significant percentage of the captures, the enemy targeted enlisted minorities as prime candidates for indoctrination and propaganda exploitation, appealing to their sense of racial injustice and what the Communists presumed to be a lukewarm attitude toward fighting a war on behalf of the "ruling class." The Viet Cong released black Army Sergeants Edward Johnson and James Jackson as a show of "solidarity and support for the just struggle of the U.S. Negroes"; the North Vietnamese sent black Navy Lieutenant Norris Charles home with a committee of peace activists. The highest-ranking black captured in the North, Air Force Major Fred Cherry, was made to listen to a recording by "black power" advocate Stokely Carmichael and, perhaps by chance but likely by design, was deposited in a cell with young Navy Lieutenant Porter Halyburton, a white Southerner with a pronounced accent. Contrary to enemy expectations, they developed a close relationship, and Cherry later credited Halyburton with saving his life when his ejection injuries became infected from medical neglect and he had to be hand-fed and helped with his bodily needs. In general, attempts to exploit racial divisions had no more success than attempts to divide junior and senior officers.

Disappointing results only made the Vietnamese try harder. They supplemented standard lectures with loudspeaker barrages of Voice of Vietnam radio broadcasts, an occasional film, and having prisoners visit reading rooms stacked with Marxist literature or take trips to view bomb damage. For the well-educated officers in the North, maintaining silence during the tedious, scripted, sometimes hours-long sessions was difficult. The motivation to debate and defend American principles was a natural inclination, especially among the more aggressive and educated POWs, who saw opportunities themselves to persuade and convert. Thoughts of indoctrinating the indoctrinators, however, proved illusory and usually led to punishment for a bad attitude. Through experience, prisoners learned that "polite silence" remained the best policy even as the captor's heavy-handed effort at reeducation could become in its own way as insufferable and loathsome as more acute forms of oppression. In the end, of course, as frustrated indoctrinators increasingly harangued and browbeat their subjects, they discredited their own claim to a moral high ground and reinforced the Americans' contempt for the adversary. ⚓

and turnkeys to prowl the corridors listening for tapping or whispered conversation. He dealt with offenders swiftly, subjecting them to stocks and cuffs, prolonged kneeling, or ropes. His operatives bound Gaither, who had been moved back to Hoa Lo with the closure of Briarpatch, hand and foot in a twisted, bent-over position that prevented sleep and caused horrible pain and left Gaither with lasting scarring and nerve damage to his ankles and legs. To get John Frederick to reveal "Stockdale's connection with the CIA," Rabbit kept the Marine blindfolded and in leg irons for a month. Elsewhere in Vegas, Phil Butler was beaten until his clothes were shredded and splattered with blood, while Jim Mulligan was clamped in stocks so tight his bowels gave out and his mind was reduced to "putty." Upon capture in May 1967, Lieutenant (jg) Charles Plumb no sooner entered Hoa Lo than he was thrown into Vegas and strung from the ceiling like a "human pretzel." Plumb was one of an unfortunate group of initiates who arrived in Hanoi as the Vietnamese were polishing their interrogation techniques and, having become more familiar with U.S. aircraft specifications and tactics, wasted no time grilling the newcomers for the next day's bombing targets and other operational information. Plumb's fellow 19 May shootdowns (see "Chronicle," p. 5) were others who received a hellish baptism at Hoa Lo; another was Lieutenant Commander Richard Mullen, seized in January 1967. Making matters worse, by 1967 the captors had taken to outfitting the rope apparatus with stronger nylon straps stripped from the downed Americans' parachutes.

Vulnerable as the prisoners were at Hoa Lo in 1967 and 1968, the Zoo was more dangerous yet, at least for a select company who became victims of an unusually methodical and sinister program. Beginning in August 1967, what appeared to be a random group of ten POWs, three Navy and seven Air Force, were introduced to a trio of Caucasians believed to be Latin Americans who arrived with much fanfare. They were driven around camp in a chauffeured sedan and sipped tea with the Zoo's top officers before being let loose to do their mayhem. Presided over by a tall, intimidating, somewhat enigmatic leader the POWs named "Fidel," the "Cuban program" may have been an indoctrination exercise to produce "Manchurian candidates" or a training program to test new interrogation methods, or simply an attempt to instill fear and teach would-be resisters an object lesson. Much about its purpose and the identity of the perpetrators remains a mystery, but what is known for sure is that it became a nightmarish ordeal for the chosen subjects.

For a year, until the operation wound down in August 1968, Fidel conducted what amounted to a personal reign of terror, relying on a mix of physical brutality and psychological pressure more extreme than anything the POWs had experienced up to that time. He gradually raised the level of violence, employing the Zoo's full "shop of horrors" and adding to the repertoire a fan belt to intensify beatings and a form of water torture whereby he had his cohorts gag the victim's mouth and pour water into his nostrils. Intermittently he kept the prisoners off balance with flattery, humor, and caprice, at one point thrusting a cigar into a subject's hand at the end of a long inquisition and forcing him to smoke it, a humiliating certification of his "progress." Ray Vohden, Larry Spencer, and Allen Carpenter were the three Navy participants in Fidel's original class. In a second phase of the program, begun early in 1968, Fidel assembled another group of ten that included veteran Wendy Rivers and a quartet of 1967 captures, Navy Lieutenant Commanders Peter Schoeffel and Paul Schulz and Lieutenants (jg) Charles Rice and Earl Lewis. Most of the Zoo population was spared Fidel's malevolence, and within the limited program there were wide variations in treatment: some, like Lieutenant Carpenter, went virtually unscathed and others narrowly survived (one Air Force casualty, Captain Earl Cobeil, eventually died from a barbaric flogging). But the Cuban program, as word of its atrocities spread, left an indelible mark as among the worst evils of the captivity.

For all the pounding the POWs absorbed during the middle years, it did not always take the lash or the yoke to inflict harsh punishment. As a way to discipline senior officers and other resistance

leaders, as well as remove them from command and influence, the Vietnamese between bouts of torture also placed targeted individuals in solitary confinement for long stretches. Stockdale, Denton, and Rutledge spent more than four years—half their captivity—in solitary, more than any POW except famed Air Force senior Robinson Risner, who poignantly described how wrenching was the experience in his book *The Passing of the Night*. The combination of solitude and sensory deprivation for months, in Risner's case years, on end in a tiny dark cell, in which the occupant lost track of day and night and was relegated to contemplating his fate in the absence of any support mechanisms, produced panic and anguish that could be more frightening than the wait on torture row. A team of Navy researchers after the war found that the service's 1973 returnees on average spent ten months in solitary, and all but one chalked up some stay there. Yet another form of torturing the mind was indoctrination, though the American officers in the northern camps found it more a nuisance than a threat to their health or sanity. Save perhaps for its use in the Cuban program, it never achieved the prominence or effectiveness it had in Korea.

The excesses of the middle years killed surprisingly few POWs in the North. More succumbed to disease or the residual effect of injuries sustained in bailing out of aircraft than from abuse. Yet the years of punishment exacted a heavy toll and left many too crippled or exhausted to savor relief when it at last arrived. The torture era came to a merciful close in 1969 but not before a final furious rampage following a failed escape attempt at the Zoo. The well-planned but ill-advised escape of Air Force Captain John Dramesi and cellmate Captain Edwin Atterberry got the pair over the Zoo Annex wall and outside the compound on the evening of 10 May but ended with their recapture at sunup the next day after they had traveled only a few miles. In retaliation, starting at the Zoo and moving on to other camps in the ensuing weeks and months, prison authorities conducted a sweeping crackdown that, in scope and ferocity, was the most brutal episode of the captivity.

The escapees themselves were hauled to Hoa Lo, trussed in ropes in separate torture chambers, and flayed so savagely that Atterberry, whose shrieks were heard in the far corners of the prison, did not survive the onslaught. At the Zoo, officials brought the entire compound to its knees in the search for accomplices, subjecting prisoners to around-the-clock questioning and reprisals that featured a rubber fanbelt-like whip of the sort introduced by Fidel. Lieutenant Connell died from punishment administered that summer. Commander McDaniel, trying to protect Connell's role in the Zoo's

To Our Comrades Up North by artist Maxine McCaffrey captures the suffering of an American pilot in a Hanoi prison. Courtesy United States Air Force Art Collection.

communication network, absorbed repeated horrific beatings over two weeks, including electric shock and a session in the ropes that left him dangling hideously with a compound fracture of the arm while guards continued to bludgeon him. Other camps saw communication purges, daily cell inspections, and the corralling of suspects that took on a sheep-to-slaughter quality that one observer likened to Jews going helplessly to the Nazi gas chambers. Even at Son Tay and other installations on the periphery, the havoc followed much the same pattern until finally running its course by late summer.

The wave of terror and retribution unleashed by the Dramesi-Atterberry escape climaxed a horror-filled four years for the American POWs. Its culmination spelled the end of the heavy punishment era and the beginning of a relatively benign last chapter in the prisoner of war story in Southeast Asia. ⚓

DPMO Files

Lieutenant Gerald "Jerry" Coffee reads a letter during the later period of captivity when prisoners could receive mail and photographs from home. Such packages were a mixed blessing, however, since they reminded long-term POWs like Coffee of special family occasions they had missed, of children grown older, and of wives grown more independent in their absence.

COPING

In postwar debriefings, the American prisoners rated their introspective moments, the time between visits to the torture room, as often just as trying and terrifying as the torture sessions themselves. Although treatment improved beginning in the fall of 1969, as the captivity stretched into its fifth and sixth years, many of the men experienced deteriorating health and creeping despair. This was especially true for those who had been incarcerated for the better part of the decade, including many Navy personnel, who made up a high percentage of the early captures. With more time on their hands, the prisoners brooded over lost youth, separation from family and country, and the unlikelihood, even if they were lucky enough to survive, that they would be able to resume any semblance of a normal life and career. Unbearable as depression and anxiety could be for the prisoner in solitary confinement, there were few, even among those who shared cells and had the benefit of communication, who at one point or another were not on the verge of losing their grip. Elemental day-to-day coping, the sheer mental duress of captivity, battling not only one's demons but boredom and idleness and all manner of hardships, posed as great an obstacle to survival as withstanding the most dreaded physical punishment.

As the prospect of an early end to the war diminished for those in custody in the middle years, the captives struggled to prepare themselves psychologically for the long haul. Geoffrey Norman writes in *Bouncing Back*: "Some were fathers of children they'd never seen, husbands of women they had lived with for only a few weeks. It seemed increasingly possible—probable, even—that they would be middle-aged before they left Vietnam." Denton figured he had "about a one-in-four chance of coming out alive, and about a one-in-fifty chance of coming out sane enough to live a normal life." Mulligan, preoccupied with thoughts of old age and mortality, knew he was "mentally thrashing" himself, even his daydreams dissolving into nightmares. Paul Galanti and Allen Brady were among a handful of prisoners who were convinced they had been drugged, so vivid were hallucinations they experienced, though Navy medical evaluators later suggested such heightened perceptions could have been induced by stress or sleep deprivation.

Were it not for the POWs' repeated and moving testimony to the importance of religion while in prison, it might seem a cliché to say that many relied on the power of faith to pull them through. Some rediscovered religious connections that had either lapsed or become too casual, devoting hours to meditation or prayer and saying grace over the scraps that passed for meals; others hid and secretly exchanged makeshift crosses and Bibles or, where there was communication, tapped each other scripture. Stockdale, while not denying the value of prayer, cited the importance of philosophical reflection and spiritual growth in a more secular sense as a source of strength and conviction. What was crucial to the POW's survival in Stockdale's estimation was some overriding and sustaining belief—be it religion or patriotism or the concept of "Unity over Self"—that emerged from what he called "the melting experience" and that stayed with the prisoner and could deliver him through continuing crises.

Stockdale and others also pointed to the stabilizing effect of a daily routine, of which prayer was but one ritual. For those unfettered and physically up to it, exercise became another. Even in the pinched quarters at Vegas's Mint or in Alcatraz's pits, where there existed only three or four square feet of open floor space, prisoners initiated a walking or running-in-place regimen in order to keep fit and pass time. For Rob Doremus, "pacing was a very large part of the day." Those accustomed to lifting weights used the only equipment available, curling waste buckets filled with excrement. Of course, for those with torn shoulder muscles and other damage from aircraft ejections or application of the ropes,

a simple push-up or sit-up was excruciating. As he "lay day after day not wanting to move" and realizing both his mind and body were on the verge of atrophy, Lieutenant Plumb recalled forcing himself to do a sit-up as he cried and pus exuded from an ulcerated wound; it took him a half hour but he finally managed the maneuver. In another instance, hugging his injured arm to his body, Jerry Coffee inched his way along his small cell, negotiating "three short steps in each direction" until at length he traversed three miles. As he "swung and bobbed through my daily journey to nowhere," Coffee developed an appreciation for the zoo inhabitants who pace "restlessly back and forth on a well-worn path in their cages, . . . establishing an invariable rhythm between the barriers that defined their pitifully scant horizons." He "vowed never again to add to their indignity by standing there, gawking, as they expressed their deepest stirrings." Late in the captivity, as treatment and conditions improved, more strenuous exercise programs became commonplace, with Lieutenant Fred Baldock reporting 4,400 sit-ups at one stretch.

Those craving order and predictability amid the insecurity found some comfort in a prison schedule that changed little over the years: wakeup at 6:00 a.m., morning meal between 10:00 and 11:00 a.m., afternoon meal from 3:00 to 5:00 p.m., bedtime at 9:00 p.m., with minor fluctuations depending on the camp and the season. Gongs punctuated the day's activities with clockwork reliability. For naval aviators used to tracking time to the second, the loss of watches was a major deprivation; they compensated as best they could, relying on the gongs, the chime of city bells, or the position of the sun insofar as it could be discerned through boarded windows. To some the seamlessly repetitive hours made the task not only difficult but moot. Even during the torture era, jailers distributed cigarettes three times daily; for smokers like Mulligan, who "savored each drag as if it were nectar," they were the highlight of the day, though the tobacco did not burn long owing to mediocre quality, holes in the paper, and the typically damp air. The guards' noon siesta became the appointed hour for communication, one POW saying they looked forward to it "the way school kids anticipate recess."

If the prison routine offered a reassuring familiarity and regularity, that same constancy had an oppressive downside, accentuating the problem of boredom. The unrelenting sameness of the schedule fostered its own malaise and required its own coping mechanisms. Through the years, concocting diversions to relieve the monotony and fill the endless hours became ever more challenging. Such "creative inactivity" was unnatural to an enterprising, action-oriented group of pilots, but it proved to be a source of salvation as beneficial as prayer and exercise. Red McDaniel made a small ball from cellmate Metzger's leftover bandages and with his one good hand tossed it up in the air again and again, counting "five thousand catches within a few days as I tried to make this pastime fill the void." Others watched intently the movements of spiders and other creatures that inhabited their cells, developing a special fascination with the gecko, a chameleon whose mischievous play and efficient dispatch of marauding flies made it an agreeable companion. When the pageant waned or became too familiar, they resorted to mind games or imaginary construction projects that could consume weeks.

"I built five houses in my imagination during my seven years in North Vietnam," Rutledge wrote after the war. "Carefully I selected the site, then negotiated with its owner for purchase. Personally, I cleared the ground, dug the foundations, laid the cement, put up the walls, shingled the roof, and landscaped the property. After I had carefully furnished the home, I sold it, took my profit, and began the entire process once again." Bob Shumaker spent 12 to 14 hours a day building and rearranging his dream house: "I'd buy all the lumber and materials. . . . I knew how many bricks were in it; how much it weighed; the square footage. . . ." Danny Glenn planned his residence down to the location of joists and studs and the exact gauge of the electric wire. Plumb remembered being awakened by Glenn in the middle of the night for his opinion on "paneling the family room downstairs."

For the prisoner in solitary or with few visual or aural outlets, no diversion went a longer way than spinning one's memory. By 1968 and 1969, long-term POWs had reconstructed whole chapters of their lives with the precision of diarists and were retrieving details so trivial and distant their vivid recall astonished them. Bill Lawrence was amazed at "how many names out of my first-grade class I could resurrect"; over the period of his captivity, he "relived" his life "in minute detail three times." Sports enthusiast Jack Fellowes replayed whole ball games. Plumb and roommate Kay Russell took turns rummaging through their respective pasts until "our minds were scraped clean." When the memory well ran dry, prisoners practiced invisible pianos and guitars, embarked on fantasy voyages, or honed their golf game. One man "played" two hours a day on a course he came to know intimately hole by hole.

Few POWs of any war had the range of ability or interests as the pilots in Hanoi—almost all were college graduates, many proficient in engineering and mathematics—and so they were well equipped to kill idle time blueprinting houses, solving equations, or engaging in other forms of mental gymnastics. Stockdale computed logarithms "with a stick in the dust" and spent a month contemplating the physics of the musical scales. Those with a humanities bent found refuge in Kipling and Keats, recalling favorite passages or verses and tapping out excerpts and sometimes whole stories to appreciative colleagues. To better know his indoctrinators and keep his mind disciplined, Ray Vohden, given occasional access to the camp "library," read all 43 volumes of Lenin's works while imprisoned at the Zoo.

For all the breadth of their interests, it would be a patent exaggeration to depict the prisoners' conversational moments as dominated by discussions of Faulkner and quantum mechanics. Where men huddled in the same cell or contacted others through the walls, the purpose was usually to offer solace or encouragement, or share news and information. And where there was small talk, the subject inevitably gravitated to more mundane matters such as baseball, movies, and women. Although on the whole the POWs probably talked—and fantasized—more about food than sex, they engaged in the usual locker-room banter; but they also had heart-to-heart exchanges about wives and relationships and confessed longing for love and affection. Belying the chauvinistic, macho references to women in some of the POW memoirs, impotence and fading masculinity became gnawing worries to men for whom the subject of females had become "increasingly abstract." "Women certainly were a topic with us," Doremus said, "but it was something we just kind of put out of our minds." Civilian Ernie Brace told an interviewer that Jim Bedinger, who roomed with him in Vegas when the two captives from Laos were transferred to Hanoi, "lived with me longer than he lived with his wife before he was captured. . . . You get to know each other extremely intimately, as far as everything in your background goes. But, as for discussions of sex, I'd say that matter was rather insignificant. We had other things on our minds. . . ."

To avoid punishment during the repressive middle years, prisoners employed the tap code for most communication beyond one's immediate cell. For all the POWs' skill at transmitting messages, unburdening one's innermost thoughts or elaborate "storytelling" was a laborious process. They persevered nonetheless. While celled next door to Marine Howard Dunn, Porter Halyburton "poured out my heart to him" in between torture sessions. "We talked about what the Vietnamese were doing to us, we talked about food, we talked about women, we talked about our past lives and what we wanted to do in the future. We tapped for hours. At one point I said, 'Howie, what do you look like?' He tapped back and said, 'Actually, I look a lot like John Wayne.'" When they got separated during a camp-wide shuffle, the two fliers weren't in contact for five years, then met in the big compound at Unity near the end of the captivity. "So I'm standing there talking to some people and this guy walks up to me," Halyburton recalled. "He's short and bald and nondescript, a complete and absolute stranger. I had never laid eyes on him before. He sticks out his hand and says, 'Hi, I'm Howie Dunn.'"

Incongruous as it might seem, in bad times as well as in good, except in the most gruesome cases

and bleakest hours, the prisoners lightened the mood by leavening solemnity with humor. Much of it was the gallows type, but it helped to defuse tension and chase depression. The pilots at the Plantation mocked the bowing requirement by genuflecting at trees, buildings, and the dogs and chickens that roamed the premises. One prankster taught a guard, who wanted to learn a standard American expression, to say upon making the rounds of the cellblock, "I'm queer"; the guard proudly greeted inmates thusly for several weeks, nonplused by the amused reaction. Some swapped ridiculous puns. Coffee remembered that each man in his group developed "his own unique signature sneeze," using a well-chosen expletive to release pent-up anger and contempt. The Vietnamese were not without their own dark sense of humor, as when they broke in the new loudspeaker system at the Zoo with a nonstop rendition of "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," in what the POWs construed to be an obvious reference to the aviators' shootdowns.

NHHC Artifact Collection

Lieutenant (jg) Everett Alvarez's ditty bag.

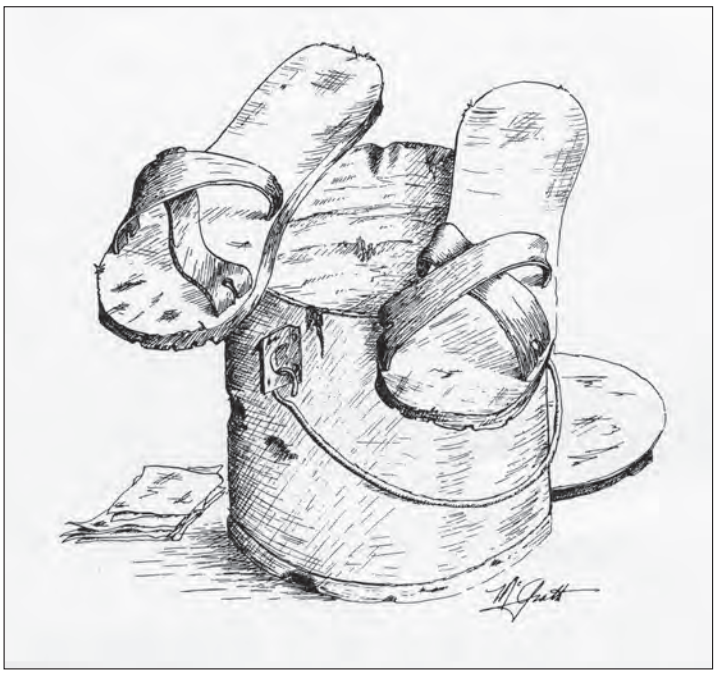
Where men shared cells or at least could communicate "moves," individuals found ingenious ways to assemble crude game boards, chess sets and checkerboards, and even decks of cards using straw, pebbles, ashes, and hoarded paper laminated with a glue synthesized from leftover rice. From bits of old bread they manufactured checkers, dice, and poker chips, the challenge being as much to keep the game pieces out of the clutches of rodents as away from the enemy's watchful eye. For writing implements, they fabricated crayons from "rat turds," quills from sharpened bamboo slivers, and ink from berries, purloined mercurochrome, or paint scraped from door frames and mixed with saliva; easier was simply making off with a pen at interrogation, which they did along with matches, string, nails, and anything else they could snatch and squirrel away. Periodically the Vietnamese raided cells for contraband and the hoarders would have to start their cache all over again.

NHHC Artifact Collection

Briefs.

As Lieutenant John Michael McGrath explained to authors Howren and Kiland in *Open Doors*, he successfully hid his "crafts" from the North Vietnamese guards: "I made gifts for my fellow prisoners. I made a little cross out of a dog bone for my wife. I whittled it on a chunk of concrete and shined it with a cloth, then drilled a hole in the top with a wire. It took hundreds of hours to make. I sewed it into the crotch of my underwear so the guards wouldn't confiscate it. I was able to hide it for two years. My wife now keeps it in a safety deposit box at the bank."

In prison, as outside it, necessity became the mother of invention. From Bibles and calendars to mouse traps and thermometers, the POWs used resourcefulness and the scant materials available to them to improvise as needed—inventing not only pastimes but ways to stay warm, keep clean, and ward off disease. The first check-ins at Hoa Lo received a standard issue of mosquito netting, cotton blanket, underwear, drinking cup, three pieces of toilet paper (to last 10 days), a straw mat for their cement bed, and a small waste bucket that doubled as a stool. For clothes, after April 1965 the enemy issued two sets of pajamas (in 1968 a navy blue or black replaced the despised red-striped uniform) and a pair of sandals. Over time, whether the result of short supply or willful mistreatment, these basic amenities became sharply curtailed. Although they were precious commodities usually absent altogether in the South—where on-the-run Viet Cong and their charges had to make do without so much as nets in mosquito-infested jungle—the want of essentials left the pilots in the North also in a precarious state. It helped to have so many bright minds with an engineering aptitude.



Sandals on the waste bucket. Drawing by John M. McGrath, reprinted by permission from his memoir published by Naval Institute Press, 1975.

Navy Lieutenant David "Jack" Rollins as an enlisted man had repaired aircraft for a decade prior to being commissioned an officer. Dubbed "Mr. Fix-It" by his Zoo mates, he utilized his background as a mechanic and metalsmith to fashion tools, including fine needles he chiseled from wire that the prisoners used to patch clothes and embroider American flags. Lieutenants (jg) Thomas Hall and Ralph Gaither were other talented craftsmen. A comrade swore that Gaither could "make anything," could "make something out of nothing," including drills "better than you can buy at the hardware store" to pierce cell walls and facilitate communication. The most innovative of all the POW handymen may have been Charlie Plumb. An inveterate tinkerer and gadgeteer, the U.S. Naval Academy graduate, with a degree in engineering and an interest in electronics, turned his cells first at Plantation and then at the Zoo into veritable workshops, developing a dozen or more "homemade" devices and methods for telling time and temperature, determining weight, and in other ways gaining control over "a completely foreign environment." Plumb nearly put together a radio from a collection of smuggled parts—wires, spools, tin foil, waxed paper, and assorted nuts and bolts—before the Vietnamese discovered the device as he was about to package the components.

Among the "environmental" challenges, the weather itself posed a major coping test. Prisoners in the South suffered most from scorching tropical heat and humidity. POWs in and around Hanoi were divided on the subject of which they found more inclement—North Vietnam's wet, dank monsoonal summers when torrential downpours could turn the camps into quagmires and steamy afternoons had them suffocating in unventilated rooms, or frigid winters that had them shivering on cement slabs and under thin blankets. Between May and September, the heat and humidity were such that prisoners in the habit of sleeping on their backs

slept on their stomachs so that soaking perspiration would not fill their eye sockets and burn their eyes. By Christmas, sweatboxes had turned into deep-freezes, the raw chill made worse by continuing high humidity. Having to bathe in January, with "little tea towels" for drying, forced a choice, one sufferer remarked, "between B.O. and pneumonia." To combat the cold, they learned how to protect their feet by putting pajama pants on upside down, hitching the open pants leg up to the waist and using the closed drawstring end to create an insulated pocket for toes; Plumb knitted from rags a hat replete with ear flaps.

Friends

Have you ever been locked in a room all alone, for many a month on end?
And never seen a friendly face, a laugh, a smile, a grin?
If you had been locked in a room all alone for many a month on end,
Then you would know how a rat or mouse could become a prisoner's friend.

Now rats and mice make very good friends, they visit you each day.
They're fairly small and quiet and they really like to play.
All my friends were rats or mice, I talked to them each day.
And we did agree that they would not bite, if I would stay out of the way.

I used to feed the rats and the mice that ran around my room.
They helped to keep my spirits high, and chase away the gloom.
So if you are ever locked in a room all alone for many a month on end.
Just look around and you may find, a rat, a mouse, a friend.

Lieutenant Commander James L. "Duffy" Hutton Hanoi, 1970 (quoted in Howren and Kiland, Open Doors*).*

Hygiene and sanitation were also vexing problems. Although the first arrivals in Hanoi had been allowed to bathe regularly and were issued a parcel of toiletries, by the end of 1965 the POWs were fortunate if they visited the washroom once every two or three weeks. With no mirrors, cold water, and maybe ten men sharing a worn razor, few were eager to shave even when they had an opportunity. At one point, Dick Stratton went 200 days without shaving or having his hair cut. Infrequent bathing and shaving caused a rash of sores about the neck and face and boils over the entire body, aggravated by mosquitoes and maggots that fed upon festering wounds and infections from untreated injuries. With dysentery spoiling clothes and bedding and waste buckets going uncleansed—some tried scouring the cans with rotten fruit but to little avail—the prisoners lived with incessant and overwhelming stench in their sealed quarters. The lack of hot water and soap made it impossible to clean metal dishware and utensils, which became rusted and were swarmed over by flies and ants when left unattended. As troublesome as leeches and mosquitoes were in the southern jungles, the northern jails had their own share of vermin, with foraging rats, some as large as opossums, and cockroaches taking over cell floors after sundown.

An ablution missed by the Americans perhaps even more than bathing or showering was brushing their teeth. The enemy usually issued new captives a toothbrush and toothpaste, but these had to last for months, with the toothpaste running out and brush handles breaking and bristles flattening until the brushes became useless. To compensate, prisoners made toothpicks from wood and bone splinters and dental floss from blanket threads. Dental troubles were common, the result not only of inadequate care but also injuries from beatings, a lack of vitamins and minerals, and teeth chipping from stones and other foreign objects in their food. Many a returned POW cited prolonged toothache as a leading source of distress in captivity.

Postwar analysis concluded that improvised solutions—besides simulated flossing, using, for example, a pinch of stashed tobacco to relieve

inflamed gums—alleviated many minor dental ailments as well as other medical and health problems. The prisoners lanced boils with razors and needles, made mud casts and wood splints for broken bones, applied pig fat to chapped or cracked lips, and nibbled on charcoal (salvaged from dump piles and fire pits) to check diarrhea and flu. For bandages, they used vines or mosquito netting; for antiseptics, toothpaste and even urine, which on passing is sterile. Some of the makeshift remedies came from survivalist training, others from intuition and sheer desperation. An individual plagued by hemorrhoids found comfort standing on his head for several hours a day. In addition to practicing "self-care," the POWs acknowledged a pair of comrades with a paramedic background—Rob Doremus and Marine Captain James Warner, who had been a pre-med student and driven an ambulance while in college—for providing useful advice on dressing wounds and relieving miseries; a later capture, Lieutenant Commander James Souder, also distinguished himself as a volunteer medic. The ministrations of cellmates were key to helping some recover from serious injuries, as in the aforementioned cases where McDaniel assisted Lieutenant Metzger (see "Chronicle," p. 14); and Halyburton, Air Force Major Fred Cherry (see "Indoctrination", p. 42).

Those with asthma and acute respiratory problems suffered cruelly through the cold, damp winters. Guardedness over "excessive touching" for fear of homosexual perceptions or susceptibility in such a cloistered setting did not prevent comrades from stroking and massaging companions who were hurting. In *Beyond Survival*, Jerry Coffee poignantly recalled one such instance involving Lieutenant (jg) David Rehmann:

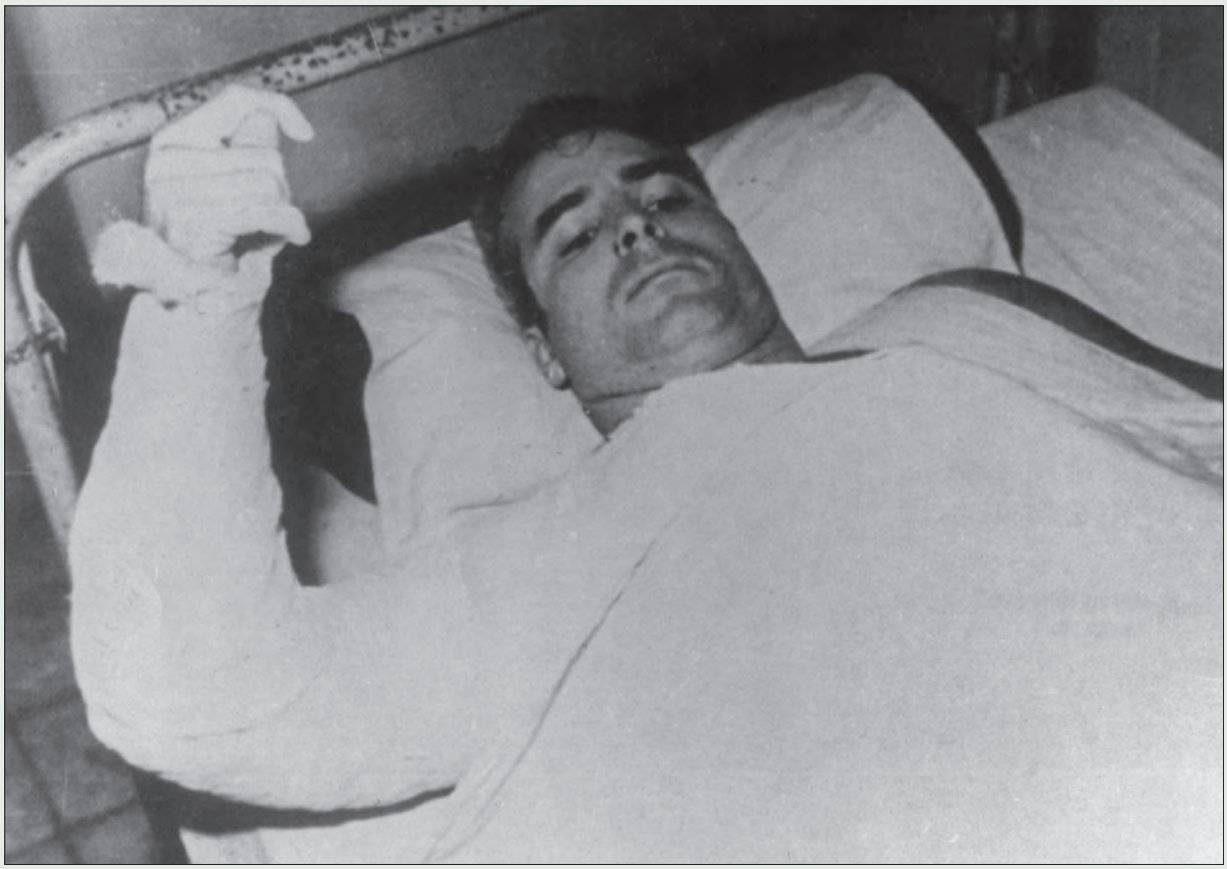
> When Dave Rehmann and I shared a cell in late '69 and early '70, he suffered interminably from asthma attacks. His pain and anxiety over his badly disfigured arm which had been shattered on ejection would have been enough, but the asthma exacted an even higher toll. He sat up sometimes through entire nights sucking for air, muscles exhausted and sweating profusely. There was little that could be done without medication, but frequently I'd massage his neck and shoulders to relieve the tenseness, to help him relax, and perhaps at least to doze. I felt no qualms about this tenderness toward my cellmate.

Air Force Captain Wesley Schierman was another asthma sufferer, nearly dying one winter at Son Tay. Ralph Gaither remembered "the phlegm built up to the point that he had to sit up through the night to keep from smothering. . . . The sound of gasping filled us with terror because of our helplessness. . . . Wes' trouble recurred every winter after that. During each summer, knowing what probably lay ahead of him, he exercised to build up his strength to get him through the next winter. All of us had tremendous respect for that man. He fought hard for his life, and he won." For many ailments, of course, there was neither cure nor relief, only the will to endure.

Air Force POW Jay Jensen wrote in his memoir *Six Years in Hell* that what he missed most while a prisoner were "a soft bed, a hot shower, and a toilet seat." Each man had his own priorities and compulsions, and therefore vulnerabilities. Some obsessed on their injuries, others on the filth around them, others on hunger. Navy Lieutenant Robert Naughton observed in a postwar "motivational" assessment that "some men crave water even before their parachutes deliver them to earth, and several sweltering days without washing . . . produce an almost maniacal desire for a bath." Hegdahl recalled how he and Stratton "talked about our lives and our families, but the subject almost always eventually got around to food. . . . I always thought of chocolate milk. . . . Dick used to talk about clams and having clambakes." Alvarez remembered how during the winter at Briarpatch "the last meal of the day frequently came when it was already dark . . . and while we ate we could hear the telltale crunch as our teeth bit through the hard outer coverings of live roaches." Eating vermin-infested rations became its own form of torture for many of the prisoners.

continued on page 54

POW Medical Care by the Enemy



OSD History Collection

Lieutenant Commander John S. McCain III swathed in a cast and bandages after his shootdown and capture in October 1967.

IN REVIEWING POST-HOMECOMING REPORTS, one finds considerable disagreement among the POWs as to both the availability and quality of medical care furnished by the enemy. Consistent with other aspects of the captivity, it seems clear that medical treatment was generally stinting and perfunctory during the early and middle years, more frequent and earnest later on, but to some extent it was erratic and unpredictable throughout, subject to shifts in both handlers' attitudes and official policy. Dick Stratton felt that prison authorities approved treatment for those POWs being groomed for early release or other propaganda events or who would have otherwise died, or to reward good behavior. "There was no such thing as preventive medicine," Stratton wrote, "except in rare cases or when they thought . . . we might be going home" and, not wanting to release diseased prisoners, "they ran around giving people shots." In fact there were occasions unrelated to propaganda concerns, behavior manipulation, or *in extremis* conditions where the Vietnamese administered care. They even performed intermittent physical examinations, although the latter may have been token exercises primarily to satisfy the International Red Cross.

Stratton himself had a tooth extracted, albeit by an elderly camp "dentist" who used a rusty hammer and a chisel to do the work and administered expired Novocain to Stratton that provided almost no pain relief. "I'd give a double yelp," he recalled, "and the guard would whack me on the top of my head driving my jaw into my collar bone." Eventually victorious, the old gent gave a big smile at his successful handiwork, packed Stratton's mouth with gauze he picked up off the floor, patted him on the shoulder, and left the room. The wound did not

get infected. The repatriation dentists at Clark Air Force Base said the guy did a great job.

Most of the northern camps had a nurse or a medic as well as a doctor who rotated among the sites, tending to both the prison staff and the POWs at each location. The prisoners, more often after 1969 but earlier as well, were periodically given vitamin shots for beriberi, sulfa tablets for dysentery, or antibiotics such as penicillin when there were ample supplies and when disease threatened the camp population. Like Stratton's Novocain, the drugs appeared to be of Eastern European origin and were typically outdated, though there is no reason to suppose prescriptions or therapies were any different for Vietnamese personnel than for the Americans. Lieutenant Robert Frishman reported that iodine was dispensed for a time at the Plantation for ringworm until guards discovered the POWs were using the tincture to write notes. Although almost every returnee had a medical horror story to rival Stratton's, Vietnamese medical incompetence and neglect may have been exaggerated. Post-repatriation health evaluations revealed instances, however isolated, where enemy practitioners displayed surprising skill and attentiveness; these included at least two successful appendectomies.

However primitive enemy medical care was by American standards, the captors' interventions doubtlessly did in some cases save lives. Lieutenant George Coker testified to how vulnerable the POWs were in so unsanitary an environment, where "the least little scratch" could lead to a softball-size infection. Coker was convinced he would have died if the North Vietnamese had not transported him to a hospital to have his grossly infected leg drained and medicated. Jim Mulligan, for all the mistreatment inflicted on him, was another who probably owed his survival to haphazard but vital treatment at a critical juncture when, consumed by a high fever from a kidney infection at Alcatraz, he was revived by "fifteen large white pills" and a special diet of bouillon. Lieutenant Commander Dale Osbourne, a 1968 capture whose body was riddled with shrapnel when his Skyhawk cockpit took a direct hit from an antiaircraft shell, almost certainly would not have made it back without medical care for massive leg, arm, and head injuries.

The fact that the enemy released no amputees among the fallen aviators (unless one counts Navy Lieutenant John Ensch, who had a damaged thumb removed) was construed by some as an indication that the Vietnamese preferred to let the most gravely ill prisoners die rather than return them maimed, but a less sinister explanation might be simply that they were able to mend or stabilize those threatened with the loss of a limb. Although it is also certain that many captives suffered greatly or perished from medical neglect—to offer but two examples, Navy Lieutenant Richard Ratzlaff later died from an untreated melanoma, and Marine Warrant Officer John Frederick succumbed to typhoid—on balance Hanoi may not have received enough credit for its record of care, especially in the later stages of the captivity.

Of course, the availability and quality of care under the Viet Cong in the South was a different story altogether, with far more limited supplies of both medicines and dietary supplements, inferior or nonexistent facilities in a guerrilla environment, and generally more adverse circumstances for captor and captive alike. As noted previously (see "Chronicle," p. 8), the mortality rate in the South was about 20 percent as compared with 5 percent in the North, a bitter irony given that the only physician among the U.S. servicemen seized during the Vietnam War, Army Captain Floyd Kushner, spent most of his captivity in the South—helpless to save a third of the Marine and Army POWs in his camp who died, some in his arms, from starvation or beriberi-induced edema. ⚓

Food at the Hilton and elsewhere in North Vietnam never became as scarce or as vile as in the South, but it was horrid nonetheless, ranging from watery pumpkin soup and a nondescript but edible side dish of greens in good times to repulsive fish heads and moldy bread or poor-grade rice during shortages. The rare exceptions occurred when trays of more appetizing fare were carted out to impress foreign visitors meeting with the POWs, or during holidays, when, depending on the progress of the war and how generous the enemy's mood, sometimes whole banquets of turkey and duck would be served complete with cookies, tea, and beer. By contrast, Marine captives held in the South, fed the same scavenged fodder as their handlers and lacking even potable water, often, as with Dr. Kushner's group at Tam Ky, verged on starvation or suffered from debilitating intestinal disease. In Medal of Honor recipient Donald Cook's camp north of Saigon, the small band of prisoners had to make do with a barely subsistence diet of manioc, bamboo shoots, and an occasional rat for protein sake.

DPMO Files

Navy Lieutenant Bradley Smith receives a medical checkup. The North Vietnamese often used these medical appointments as propaganda opportunities.

This is not to say that the aviators in Hanoi did not themselves suffer from chronic malnutrition. For most of the decade, rations in the North Vietnam camps were enough to sustain life but not health. Being hungry, Larry Chesley noted, "doesn't mean just going without food for two or three days. It means going for days and weeks and months and seeing your body deteriorate, feeling yourself become steadily weaker. . . . It cannot be described—only experienced." Chesley lost 60 pounds in three to four months. Others noticed metabolic changes—scaly skin, rotted teeth, failing eyesight—that affected mental outlook as much as scars inflicted from abuse. Bad as it was, food became an obsession, with little crumbs of bread lingered over and then devoured as if they were confections. When prisoners were not eating or stowing food, they dreamed about it, conjuring up elaborate recipes and menus. Denton remembered that when the Alcatraz group was able to communicate, "every evening, Mulligan would construct a dinner for Stockdale, patiently working through the soup and salad, the roast beef, parfait, and even the brandy Alexander and proper cigar. Shumaker was especially good on breakfasts, and each morning we would eagerly await his offering while the guards were ladling out our miserable fare." By 1971, on the upside of the captivity, Mulligan's menus were still a fantasy, but the mass of prisoners at Unity received larger portions and tastier fare as officials began to fatten them up for repatriation. Roommates Ken Coskey and Byron Fuller decided that "the kitchen did not know what was going on in Paris," but others were convinced of the correlation.

The passing of the years healed the worst physical wounds but took an unrelenting psychological toll. Doremus said that by 1971, even as they were being brought up to speed on world and national events by the "new guys" checking into the Hilton,

the early captures were losing all sense of perspective: "Everything that we talked about would be circa 1965 or before, because that was when we were 'alive.' If somebody new came in and started talking about an Oldsmobile Toronado, why I just couldn't picture that car." The more time elapsed, the more "we thought we'd never be able to catch up."

Until 1969, only a smattering of letters to and from the POWs were delivered, some of which the Vietnamese allowed pacifist intermediaries to carry in and out of the country, and others where the correspondents were already known to the outside world through Communist propaganda photos or statements. In one notable instance, Air Force POW Lieutenant Alan Brudno managed to sneak past enemy censors a hidden reference to Navy pilot Lieutenant (jg) David Wheat that alerted Naval Intelligence and Wheat's grateful family that he was alive even if in captivity. All 22 parcels shipped to American prisoners in Hanoi during Christmas 1966, and 451 of 465 at Christmas 1967, were returned bearing a rejection stamp by the North Vietnamese post office. Even in the case of those not returned in the 1967 batch, none reached their intended recipient. A large number of prisoners received mail and packages for the first time at Christmas 1968 and regularly after October 1969, though correspondence continued to be censored and packages confiscated or stolen.

As they finally began to receive mail and packages from home, which prison officials had previously confiscated, the letters helped to fill them in on what they were missing but were a two-edged sword. Fathers lamented not being there for their children's proms and graduations; some had become grandfathers while in captivity; others had lost parents. Lieutenant (jg) David Carey learned that the reason letters from home were signed only "Love, Mom" was that his father had died in 1969. Snapshots underscored how much the culture had changed, showing women in miniskirts, relatives with wide neckties and bell-bottom trousers, kids with long hair. Stratton was shocked by photographs of his shaggy-haired sons, venting to a cellmate, "Do you think there are any barbers left in Palo Alto?" Worst of all were intimations, in the tone or absence of mail, of cooled relationships and marital infidelity. Plumb remarked sardonically that the postal agents selectively withheld mail, but they "never made us wait for 'Dear Johns.'"

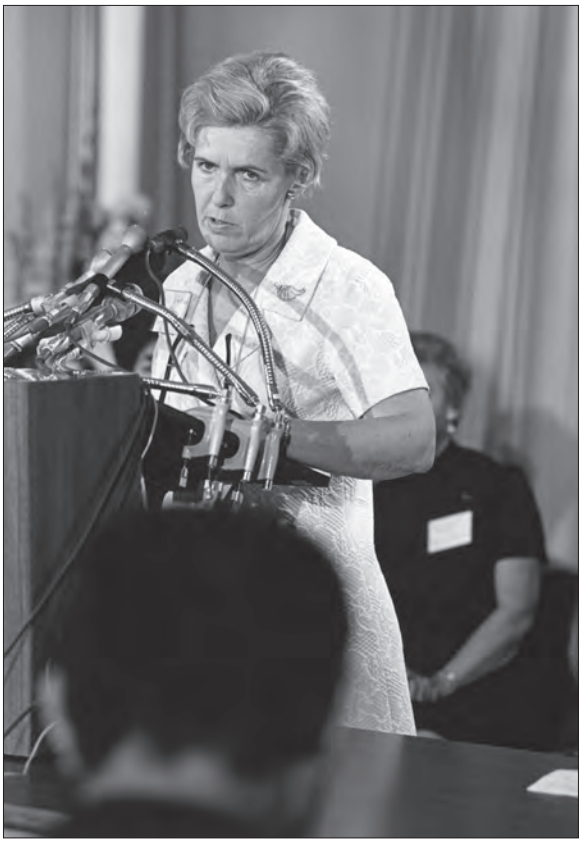
The make-believe and "creative inactivity," whether "dream" menus or invisible golf or absentee home design, sometimes only underscored their predicament—the permanent loss of so many cherished moments and occasions. One prisoner refused to go down memory lane because it was too painful, especially visualizing his wife and children. For others it was precisely those memories that kept them going. For all the stratagems to banish the melancholy and keep busy, boredom, said Plumb, "visited us like a bill collector." To the extent they kept the negative thoughts at bay, stayed alert and active, and conquered one day at a time until they could finally see the light at the end of the tunnel, the greater hold they had on sanity and survival. During a long stay in solitary, in which he fought back waves of fear and panic, Rutledge realized that "like a blind man who is forced to develop other senses to replace his useless eyes," the POW "must quit regretting what he cannot do and build a new life around what he can do." In the face of so dismal a present and uncertain a future, that was easier said than done, and some were more successful than others at building that "new life" and winning what Red McDaniel called "the war inside." ⚓

Homecoming montage of newspaper headlines.

RELIEF AND RELEASE

The year 1969, momentous for America's landing a man on the moon, also proved to be a pivotal year in expanding the horizons and hopes of the U.S. POWs confined in Southeast Asia. For reasons having as much to do with developments in Washington as in Hanoi, the lot of the American prisoners improved markedly beginning in the fall of that year, first in the North and eventually in the South, as the enemy herded the main body of Viet Cong and NVA prisoners in the South to Hanoi. Almost overnight, it seemed, the Vietnamese went from violating the Geneva prisoner-of-war protocols with impunity to coming close to abiding by the spirit if not the letter of the requirements. Explanations for the reversal in the enemy's conduct are many and complex, and without access to relevant North Vietnamese archives, we may never know for sure what accounted for the transformation, but unquestionably the mobilization of public opinion and stepped-up pressure from the U.S. government, coinciding with the death of North Vietnamese president Ho Chi Minh, were major contributing factors.

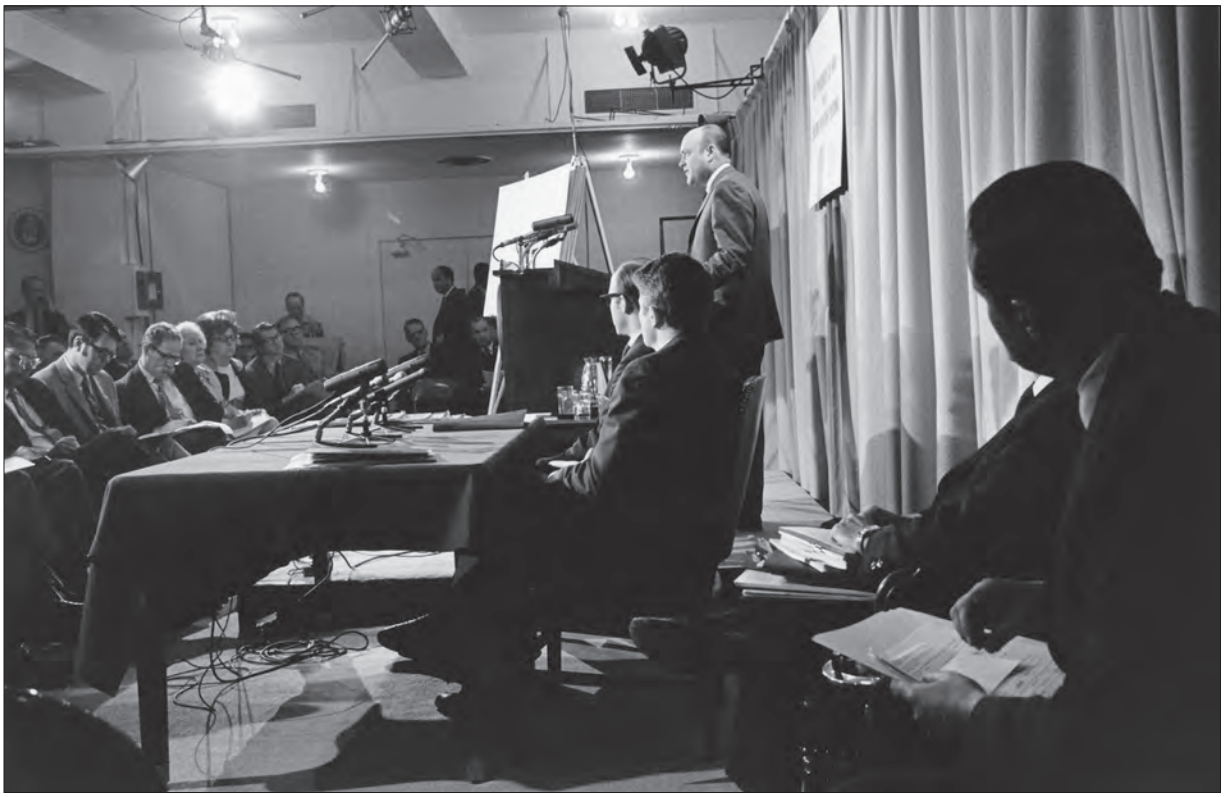
For years, the Johnson and then Nixon administrations sidestepped or low-keyed the prisoner issue because of its political sensitivity during an unpopular war. Spurred by the families of POWs and increasing Pentagon concern over the fate of the captives, they gradually acknowledged disturbing evidence that the POWs were being mistreated. Growing dissatisfaction with the State Department's failure to challenge more aggressively the Communists' claims of "humane and lenient" treatment of the American prisoners caused the Defense Department—Navy and Marine Corps officials in particular—to push for high-level White House attention and a centralized organization within the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) to replace what had been a fragmented accounting effort by the individual services. By the fall of 1967, the Pentagon had instituted a top-echelon DOD



OSD History Collection

Sybil Stockdale, wife of POW Commander James B. Stockdale and founding member of the National League of Families, speaks to the press.

Prisoner of War Policy Committee, with Navy Captain John Thornton, who had been a Korean War POW, providing full-time administrative support. But it was not until a group of POW wives, led by Sybil Stockdale, Louise Mulligan, and Jane Denton, formed what would become the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia that the issue finally began to receive the priority it deserved. The group prodded the bureaucracy, lobbied Congress, and took their message to audiences throughout the country and agencies around the world. Citizen-activists like Texas businessman Ross Perot also helped to galvanize attention and support. By the time the Hegdahl-Frishman press conference in September



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Secretary of Defense Laird at the "Go Public" news conference, 19 May 1969.

1969 compellingly spotlighted the scope of the abuse, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird had already launched, in May, an all-out "Go Public" campaign committed to exposing and condemning Hanoi's transgressions and focusing awareness at home and abroad on the prisoners' plight. A final catalyst was the sudden death of Ho on 3 September, a milestone event that likely facilitated the regime's reexamination of its own POW policies in the face of mounting U.S. and international scrutiny and worry internally over the deteriorating condition of the hostages.

Porter Halyburton, living in the Zoo Annex at the time, later surmised that Ho's successors seized on his passing as an "opportunity" to implement a shift that was already under consideration: "Americans were making a big deal about our treatment, wearing POW bracelets and sending letters by the truckload to the Vietnamese delegation in Paris. I think the Vietnamese worried that this outcry might jeopardize the antiwar support they had nurtured so carefully." Whatever factors may have been responsible, "night had turned to day," as Denton described the dramatic change in the northern jails following Ho's funeral. Soon, Alvarez remembered, there was "a lot less brutality—and larger bowls of rice." The pace and extent of improvement varied from camp to camp, but by year's end most prisoners were getting a third meal (breakfast) daily, extra blankets and clothing, and double the usual allotment of cigarettes. "The biggest change," said Halyburton, "was they quit torturing people."

Through 1970, the Vietnamese relaxed regulations along with punishment, dropping the bowing requirement, permitting the prisoners more outdoor exercise, and delivering mail and packages in unprecedented numbers. Men who had been in solitary for months or years suddenly received cellmates. At Son Tay, workers unboarded windows and tore down walls to give the prisoners more ventilation and space. Authorities continued to prohibit

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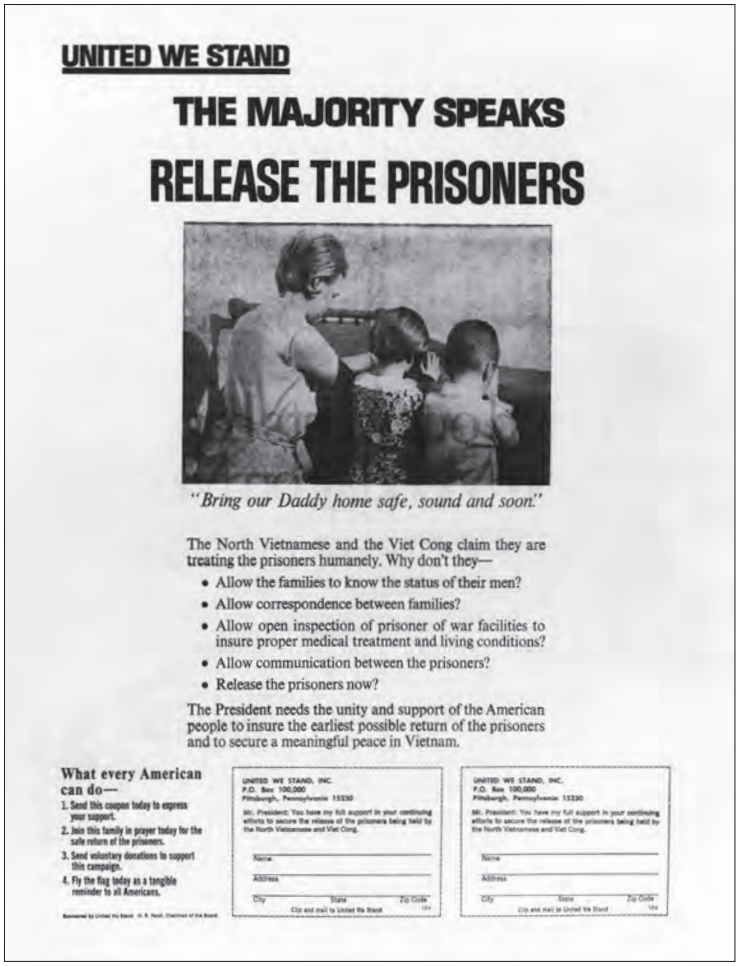
Secretary Laird meets with POW wives at the Pentagon, July 1969.

communication, but offenders encountered looser monitoring and lesser penalties. Hoa Lo remained a bleak and forbidding place, but even the old fortress took on some softer aspects. The enemy installed mirrors in the bath area (a mixed blessing, as many of the aviators had not seen their faces in a mirror since being aboard a carrier and were shocked at how much they had aged in captivity), permitted more regular shaving, supplied occasional hot water, and allocated each cell time in a room where a ping-pong table had been set up. Nowhere were the prisoners given a longer leash than at the new camp that opened at Dan Hoi (Faith) in the summer. Here, under an "open door" arrangement, inmates were able to mingle inside or outside their building, even play basketball together and play cards with a real deck without having laboriously to tap each hand through the walls.

The end to atrocities did not mean an end to hard times. Anxious moments and bad days persisted, including relapses in guards' behavior, more suffering (and deaths) from injuries and illness, and the continuing mental and physical grind of what remained a Spartan existence despite the trappings of greater comfort and freedom. The cat-and-mouse game between captor and captive never really let up. The nearly 200 prisoners who entered the system after 1969 underwent interrogation and propaganda exploitation in a far different risk climate than their predecessors but with the nature of the contest much the same—inquisitors trying to extract written or taped testimony to buttress the Communists' cause before their prey could be brought into the POW network and counseled by comrades on resistance. Instances of stiff punishment if not programmed torture recurred intermittently. At Son Tay, even as the Vietnamese installed a volleyball court in the middle of the compound, they discouraged congregating and disrupted the senior leadership by moving or keeping incommunicado a trio of officers, first Navy Lieutenant Commander Render Crayton, then Marine Major Howard Dunn, and just



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"United We Stand" newspaper promotion urges improved treatment and early release of American prisoners.

before they shut down the camp in July 1970, Navy Lieutenant Commander Claude Clower. Crayton in particular was in bad shape, down to 100 pounds and looking "ghostly" as he struggled to eat and stay alive. The gaunt six-footer hung on for more than two years to make it out; less fortunate was Commander Kenneth Cameron, who languished ill and prostrate for months in the Heartbreak section of Hoa Lo before the Vietnamese, after a belated, unsuccessful attempt to force-feed him, removed him to a hospital in October 1970, along with Earl Cobeil and J. J. Connell. None of the three was seen again.

Farnsworth and Skid Row, the two camps in the North that housed prisoners up from the South, remained somewhat outside the experience of the other northern camps through 1970. Perhaps because the implementation of torture and terror had never been as orchestrated or as systematic there as at Hoa Lo or the Zoo, the post-1969 improvements at these camps were less discernible, too. Both places were miserable, squalid hellholes that became marginally more tolerable after 1969 but possessed few of the privileges or amenities that officials introduced to the other camps; supervisors there still kept men in solitary. At Farnsworth, two Marine officers—Captains Bruce Archer and Paul Montague—along with Corporal John Deering, paid a heavy price for disobedience. Skid Row, which contained mostly Army and U.S. civilian prisoners, owed its name to the filth and disrepair it accumulated over the many years the North Vietnamese had used it as a civilian penitentiary; the so-called Old Man of the South, Army Captain Floyd Thompson, the longest held POW captured in the South and the longest held prisoner of war in U.S. history, turned up here. Farnsworth closed in November 1970, its several dozen residents bused into Hanoi and deposited in the Plantation. Skid Row remained open until January 1972, functioning as a sort of penal colony for those not behaving at Hoa Lo, while its "Southern" occupants during 1971 were scattered to two smaller facilities in the countryside north and south of Hanoi known as K-49 (or Mountain Camp) and Rockpile.

Despite the flashes of regression and vestiges of the old regime, by the time the enemy gathered the bulk of the American prisoners in Hoa Lo's Unity compound late in 1970, both the POWs and their handlers were in a fundamentally "different emotional and environmental situation," Stockdale told his debriefer. "We still had guards. We still had communication problems. I spent a few weeks in irons as did several others, and all that jazz," but

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Christmas 1970 at the "Zoo." Lieutenant Everett Alvarez Jr., center, in his sixth year of captivity, sings carols with fellow POWs.

captivity now resembled "simple straightforward detention." Simmering tensions and lingering animosity still pushed tempers to the edge. As eager as the prisoners were to test the new boundaries, the Vietnamese were equally determined not to lose face or relinquish the upper hand. Although prison officials and the POWs' senior officers sought to avoid confrontation, sporadic flareups occurred on both sides right up to release. As late as April 1972, guards severely beat Navy Lieutenant Michael Christian, whom the enemy had identified as a "bad attitude" case, after he cheered a bombing raid over Hanoi that may have hit too close for the jailors' comfort; in June 1972, interrogators subjected a new shootdown, Marine Captain William Angus, to brutal treatment, probably also owing to the effects of the springtime bombardment, the first over the capital since March 1968. For their part, the prisoners churned the atmosphere by insisting on conducting an organized service on Sunday where men recited the pledge of allegiance along with prayers, resulting in the so-called "church riot" in February 1971 that saw a dozen culprits removed for punishment. The Vietnamese kept the POWs off balance with the periodic transfer of "agitators" to Skid Row and the larger shipment of mostly junior officers to the retrograde facility at Dogpatch in May 1972.

Compared with the purgatory of the middle years, even the rougher interludes after 1969 were a relative "piece of cake," Stockdale observed. More in evidence were the ongoing improvements. The summer of 1971 in particular saw significant advances at Unity: the installation of ceiling fans, access to an infirmary the prisoners dubbed "Mayo," and tastier and more generous rations. Jack Rollins noted wryly that when he started to pick up weight, his shape changed. "I had been size 34 waist when I went to Viet Nam, but now I needed size 36."

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POWs enjoying a game of basketball show weight gain during the later stage of captivity.

Greater strength and freedom also expanded exercise options, including running laps around the crowded yard. Mulligan remembered the hobbled Stockdale "running lickety-split like a man on a peg leg." The large cells became beehives of nonstop activity: chess tournaments (the Vietnamese provided each room with a Russian-made set), high-stakes poker games (no longer for fun but keeping score, with the expectation now that debts would be collected upon release), jitterbug lessons in anticipation of the "dancing in the streets" that would greet them at homecoming, even a toastmasters' club. There being no shortage of "instructors" among them with advanced degrees or expertise, the prisoners enrolled in a virtual university of study groups and "courses" on subjects ranging from history and politics (Bill Lawrence offered a seminar on the Civil War) to languages (Marine Captain Lawrence Friese taught Russian) to music and art appreciation, beekeeping, and diesel maintenance. For evening entertainment, residents put together elaborate skits, two of the more memorable ones occurring during Christmas 1971, a "Hanoi Players" performance of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol,* with John McCain and Orson Swindle among the participants, and another production featuring hefty Marine pilot Jerry Marvel (captured in the same incident as Friese) as Santa Claus.

On the home front, meanwhile, Secretary Laird established under DOD's POW Policy Committee a POW/MIA task force, chaired by OSD's Dr. Roger Shields and directed by Rear Admiral Horace Epes Jr., to achieve the release and full accounting of the American prisoners of war and to coordinate policies and planning for the POWs' safe return. By 1972, plans were already well along for the processing of recovered U.S. personnel under the operational title Egress Recap, renamed Operation Homecoming early in 1973. With indications that the long captivity was finally nearing an end, OSD and

Courtesy Kenneth Coskey

Commander Kenneth Coskey, left, a Navy A-6 pilot, with his bombardier navigator, Lieutenant Commander Richard McKee, before their plane was shot down. McKee was rescued, but Coskey would spend four years, seven months in the Hanoi Hilton before his release.

Courtesy Kenneth Coskey

Commander Coskey, after captivity, strides across the tarmac with his Air Force escort at Hanoi's Gia Lam Airport toward the military transport that will repatriate the former POWs.

USN 1155654

The first group of American prisoners line up for departure from Hanoi's Gia Lam Airport, 12 February 1973.

Courtesy Eugene McDaniel

Commander Eugene "Red" McDaniel is greeted by a U.S. Air Force representative upon the former's release from captivity in March 1973.

NAH 002775

Former prisoners Lieutenant Commanders Edward A. Davis, left, and Larry Spencer enjoy their first taste of freedom aboard the Air Force transport plane.

service representatives worked through a myriad of repatriation issues relating to medical evaluations, family counseling, intelligence debriefings, public affairs guidance, and legal and financial assistance. Staff addressed both immediate health and logistical requirements and the longer-term needs of the returnees, some of whom had neither flown an airplane nor gotten into a car for years and faced profound "decompression" and "reacculturation" adjustments with respect to careers, marriages, and all manner of daily routines. The stresses of reentry for these modern-day "Rip Van Winkles" were such that upon their evacuation to the Joint Homecoming Reception Center at Clark Air Base in the Philippines, many had to get reacquainted with using a knife and fork and telephone. The planning proceeded deliberately so that by the time the Christmas 1972 bombing broke the deadlock in the Paris peace negotiations, the DOD task force had concluded preparations for the prisoners' release and return except for the exact time and order of departure.

On 31 January 1973, the North Vietnamese assembled the American POWs at Unity to announce that a truce had been initialed in Paris and an agreement reached on prisoner exchange and repatriation. Next door in Vegas, they collected a hundred or so U.S. military and civilians captured in the South and Laos, who had been trucked into Hoa Lo from Plantation, Rockpile, and K-49, and conveyed the news to them also. With complete freedom now to communicate and roam the compounds, the prisoners spent their last days in Hanoi exercising in the chilly sunshine and feasting on fresh supplies of bread and vegetables, canned meat and fish, and unlimited cigarettes. One of the last matters to be settled was what the prisoners would wear on their sendoff: the POWs wanted to come out in their confinement uniform, the Vietnamese preferred civilian suits, and the two sides compromised on an outfit of black shoes, dark trousers, and a gray windbreaker.

Beginning on 12 February and culminating on 29 March, the enemy released the prisoners in four principal stagings, for the most part in order of capture, roughly 400 from Hoa Lo and 100 each from the Zoo and Plantation (which reopened to receive the arrivals from Dogpatch). Alvarez's group, the first to leave, spent their last evening at the Hilton getting haircuts and showers and visiting a supply room to try on their "go-home" clothes. Jerry Coffee recalled that they playfully zipped and unzipped their jackets and laced and unlaced the shoes, as most "hadn't seen a zipper, buttons, or shoelaces for years." Each prisoner was issued a small black tote bag in which they were allowed to pack what few possessions they had—letters, toiletries and other items accumulated from parcels, and any souvenir they could sneak out, several opting for the tin drinking cup. Ed Davis stuffed in his bag a small puppy given him by a guard. Dick Stratton's

NA 1155658

American POWs exult when an Air Force C-141A transport bound for Clark Air Base in the Philippines takes off from Gia Lam Airport, 18 February 1973.

NA 1155691

Admiral Noel Gaylor, Commander in Chief, Pacific, and other U.S. military representatives greet the POWs disembarking at Clark Air Base in the Philippines,

National Archives

Lieutenant Commander John S. McCain III is welcomed home by his father, Admiral John S. McCain Jr., who served as Commander in Chief, Pacific when his son was in captivity.

biographer noted that he was one returnee who "had no desire to come home with any keepsakes. . . . He had enough permanent mementos on his body."

As with coping in prison, some made the transition home more easily than others. When the Marine held the longest by the enemy, Captain Chapman, arrived stateside, General Louis Wilson shook his hand and said, "Welcome back to the Marine Corps." Chapman replied, "Thank you, General, but I never left." Some picked up their lives as normally as if they had merely returned from an extended tour of duty overseas; others never recovered from dissolved marriages, shortened careers, or the awful memories. Stockdale, Denton, Lawrence, Fuller, and Shumaker were among a score of the POWs who attained flag rank. Old Man of the North Alvarez went on to law school and, after his retirement from the Navy in 1980, held a string of important posts in the government before entering business. Stockdale went on to head the Naval War College. Lawrence became superintendent of the Naval Academy and Deputy Chief of Naval Operations. Denton and McCain were elected to the U.S. Congress along with two of their Air Force colleagues, including Douglas "Pete" Peterson, who in the spring of 1997, 24 years after homecoming, became the first U.S. ambassador to North Vietnam. McCain ran for president in 2008 on the Republican ticket.

There remained the wrenching question of the fate of some 1,300 U.S. personnel who were missing in action as a result of the Vietnam War as of 27 January 1973. Subsequent, inconclusive reports of sightings and other information indicated that some of the MIAs may have been prisoners at one point; despite accusations of negligence or a cover-up, there is no evidence that U.S. officials knowingly left behind any American POW. The Department of Defense eventually set the individual total at 3,887 in its Personnel Missing–Southeast Asia (PMSEA) database, a number that includes returned POWs, civilian and foreign nationals, MIAs, servicemen who were killed in action but their bodies not recovered (KIA/BNR), and anyone who could be or had been perceived as unaccounted for from the Vietnam War. Of the 2,646 Americans originally listed in the PMSEA database, 923 had been accounted for as of 14 December 2009. Many were buried with full military honors in accordance with the wishes of surviving family members. Efforts continue to recover the 1,723 Americans who remain unaccounted for from the conflict. Spearheading this mission is the Defense Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office. This office and its dedicated staff ensure that these men will not be forgotten. ⚓

OSD History Collection

The black official POW/MIA flag is flown on six commemorative holidays at designated federal sites.

The Author

The late Stuart I. Rochester was the Chief Historian in the Office of the Secretary of Defense. He received his MA and PhD in history from the University of Virginia and taught at Loyola College in Baltimore before coming to the Pentagon in 1980. His narrative history, *Honor Bound: American Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia, 1961–1973*, coauthored with Frederick Kiley, was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in history. He wrote numerous other books, articles, and papers, including *American Liberal Disillusionment in the Wake of World War I* and *Takeoff at Mid-Century: Federal Civil Aviation Policy in the Eisenhower Years*.

Acknowledgments

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Suggested Reading

The most authoritative and comprehensive work on the U.S. POW experience during the Vietnam War is Stuart I. Rochester and Frederick Kiley, *Honor Bound: American Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia, 1961–1973* (Naval Institute Press, 1999). A book written soon after the prisoners' release that remains an interesting and informative account is John G. Hubbell, *P.O.W.: A Definitive History of the American Prisoner-of-War Experience in Vietnam, 1964–1973* (Reader's Digest Press, 1976). One of the few in-depth examinations of stateside POW policy and planning during the war, including Code of Conduct review and homecoming preparations, is Vernon E. Davis, *The Long Road Home: U.S. Prisoner of War Policy and Planning in Southeast Asia* (Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2000).

Among the best memoirs by Navy POWs are Everett Alvarez Jr., with Anthony S. Pitch, *Chained Eagle* (Donald I. Fine, 1989); Gerald Coffee, *Beyond Survival* (Putnam, 1990); Dieter Dengler, *Escape from Laos* (Presidio Press, 1979); and Jim and Sybil Stockdale, *In Love and War* (Harper & Row, 1984). See also Scott Blakey, *Prisoner at War: The Survival of Commander Richard A. Stratton* (Doubleday, 1978), John M. McGrath, *Prisoner of War: Six Years in Hanoi* (Naval Institute Press, 1975), and Geoffrey Norman, *Bouncing Back* (Houghton Mifflin, 1990). Taylor Baldwin Kiland's and Jamie Howren's *Open Doors: Vietnam POWs Thirty Years Later* (Potomac Books, 2005) looks at the later lives of 30 former POWs.

For the U.S. Marine POW experience in Southeast Asia, see Charles D. Melson and Curtis G. Arnold, *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The War That Would Not End, 1971–1973* (History and Museum Division, U.S. Marine Corps, 1991), chap. 15; and Gary D. Solis, *Marines and Military Law in Vietnam: Trial by Fire* (History and Museum Division, U.S. Marine Corps, 1989), chap. 10.

Lieutenant Commander Robert Shumaker, shown here at capture in February 1965, was the second pilot shot down over North Vietnam. He was a tough resister and clever communicator who endured terrible punishment at the Zoo and elsewhere during his long captivity.

The New York Times
Hanoi to Free 2
POWs to be freed
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POW freeing—time for thanksgiving
'Doesn't seem real': Big day for families of Illinois POWs
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Quiet Reception Awaits Returning POWs at California Base
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EASTERN EDITION
In a Complex Struggle P.O.W. Became Pawn
Nixon Urges Day of Prayer For POWs
COPTERS FLY IN SOUTH BUT PLANES GO T
LT. CMDR. EVERETT ALVAREZ JR. A POW since 1964
CAPT. JEREMIAH A. DENTON JR. Taken prisoner in 1965
CAPT. LARRY CHESLEY Shot down April, 1966.
CAPT. PETER GIROUX Shot down December, 1972.
143 POWs Are Set Free
27 Released After Delay
By PETER ARNETT
POW's animated, Hanoi paper says
POW'S
GOD BLESS AMERICA & NIXON
A returning POW shows his handmade sign after arrival at Clark AFB from Hanoi.
Hanoi speeds POW rele
in apparent goodwill bi
By Dana Adams Schmidt
Others still missing
POWs Smuggle Puppy in Han
For Flight Home from Hanoi to
'HI, MOM'
POWs Call Home ... So Many Tears
'Welcome home!'
Airlift Doctors Review
eatest Mission': POWs on Way
Welcome
rip Home
Many Grab Phones To Call Families
Medevac Planes
POWs free, in good shape
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Agony and frustration subside
After 12-hour wait, it's day of ecstasy for 27 POWs
'Doesn't seem real': big day for POW kin
THE SUN
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Prisoners Coming Home
HOSPITAL LIFE IS HECTIC
POWs Get Steaks and Promotions
First 142 Viet POWs awaited back home
An Emotional J
VC Frees 27 Ame
After Transfer D
Long Wait Is Ended for 27 of Returning P.O.W.'s
Free in South Vietn
ROCKVILLE MAJOR CALLS HOME
OFFICIALS IDENTIFY 3 POWs WHO REQUIRED STRETCHERS
Ex-POW Is Back in Char
Nixon Talks With
Calls the Release
Phones Ring: 'Hello, Pop' ... 'Hi, Mom'
nquirer

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