

THE PRISONER

“They put us out there in the damned cane field to protect a sugar mill owned by Madame Nhu. Who the hell is Madame Nhu to die for?”—Ex-Sgt. George E. Smith

In November 1965, upon being released after two years of imprisonment by the National Liberation Front, “Greenberet” Staff Sergeant George E. Smith announced that when he returned to the United States he planned to work with the peace movement. He never did. After the press conference which Smith held jointly with Staff Sergeant Claude D. McClure in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, the two men were sent to Bangkok where the U.S. Army took charge of them. After a meal and phone calls to their families they were put on a plane for the States via the Philippines. They were expected home in two days. Instead they were short-shipped to the United States’ military bastion in Okinawa for “debriefing.” After persistent inquiries as to their whereabouts, the military told the press that both men had been formally charged with giving aid to the enemy and would be tried by courts-martial. Efforts to see the men, get them civilian counsel and bring them to the States came to nothing and the months passed. Then, as quietly as they had been sidetracked to

Okinawa and as suddenly as the military had announced the court martial charges, the men were shipped to the States and discharged—having been neither tried nor cleared of the charges which had been brought against them.

Although Smith never contacted the peace movement, I managed to track him down to his mother’s home in Chester, West Virginia, shortly after his discharge in April 1966, where I spoke to him briefly. The net result of the interview in terms of positive information was zero. He didn’t trust me—or anyone else—and wasn’t about to talk. But he did say that when he got things figured out he might tell his story. I never expected to hear from him again.

This spring, however, Smith wrote to say that he would like to tell what he knew. The Navy’s handling of the Pueblo affair had apparently prompted his letter—he felt that his “harassment by the Army” was perhaps similar to Commander Bucher’s by the Navy. In any case, he wanted to talk.

SETTLING INTO A CHAIR WITH A CUP of coffee, ex-Sergeant George Smith started at the beginning—the night of November 23, 1963, at the Special Forces camp of Hiep Hoa. He was part of a 12-man team which had been in Viet-Nam about five months. Four days earlier, Captain Horne, the officer in charge of the team, had received a report of perhaps a battalion of enemy troops in the area. He discounted it, leaving Lieutenant Colby, the executive officer, and four other Americans—Sergeants Isaac Camacho, Kenneth Roraback, Claude McClure and George Smith—at Hiep Hoa with their auxiliary forces while he took the rest of his men ahead to start a new camp on the day of the 23rd.

That night the Americans went to sleep in their thatched team house. At midnight Smith awakened to bursts of gunfire. “The VC must have paced off the distance. They were getting first-round hits with white phosphorous, and I found out later that traitors had let them into camp to set charges alongside the house.”

Barefoot and wearing only undershorts, Smith grabbed his webbing and weapon and ran outside to the mortar pit next to the house. The burning house was throwing out such heat and flame, however, that he was afraid to open the mortar ammunition for fear a random spark would set off the cellophane-enclosed increment powder. The scene illuminated by the fires was one of chaos—mortars exploding, tracers lacing the air, people shouting and screaming. Smith

started firing at a group of shadowy figures outside the gate only to find that they were his own Strike Force making a break for it. He made his way over the sandbags to a smaller bunker 30 yards away from the house where he was joined immediately by a Strike Force soldier with an automatic rifle.

As suddenly as it began, the mortar barrage stopped, and in a few more minutes the small arms fire tapered off. For the first time Smith saw the NLF soldiers. Wearing black shorts and camouflage helmets, they swarmed over the camp. “They [the VC] were moving around as if they owned the camp and as far as I was concerned they did.” In the 20 minutes that had passed since he was awakened, Smith had seen Sergeant Camacho go to his mortar pit and knew by the flash from the tube that he was firing. He never did see Colby or Sergeants McClure and Roraback. Then even Camacho’s mortar was silent.

Four or five Viet Cong jumped into an adjoining pit and started firing at Smith’s bunker. It was only going to be a matter of seconds until someone got around to lobbing a grenade into his hole, so he and his companion threw out their weapons. His arms were tied and he was led over to the latrine. All firing had stopped and a few minutes later he was joined by Camacho, also bound. Camacho told Smith that Colby had joined him in the mortar pit stark naked except for his Ranger harness, and had told him to cover him and the Vietnamese Special Forces Commander while they made a

by Donald Duncan

break for the front gate. Camacho had followed orders but when he didn't see Smith, McClure or Roraback, he turned around and came back. He was immediately set upon and clubbed with a rifle which left blood streaming down his neck.

Smith and Camacho were kept there while the NLF soldiers gathered up the 60- and 81mm mortars, the Strike Force weapons, the extra weapons in camp and as much ammunition as they could carry. The two Americans estimated the enemy force as at least 400 men and were later told that it was the crack "Fidel Castro" battalion. In the process of getting out of camp the two men, on short rope leads, were prodded none too gently with rifle barrels and butts. Smith was plagued by the additional discomfort of having to walk barefooted. Suddenly the whole area was lit up as the Vietnamese Air Force started dropping flares. They could clearly see the sugar mill with its ARVN detachment and American advisors a scant 300 yards away, but to the captives' surprise not a single round was fired their way. "Probably afraid of making the VC mad," Smith said with a laugh.

"The flares were followed by an air strike, but we didn't worry about that because we'd never known them to hit anything. They dropped napalm but they missed the furthest column by at least a thousand yards. The columns were still in the open fields about 200 yards apart and quite easy to see, but there was no damage done. They [the NLF] didn't seem worried, didn't even hurry. When the strafing started they would wait till they heard the planes coming in their direction, crouch along a small ditch, and then start walking again. I was worried about the napalm, of course, in case they hit something by accident. They took us to a small 20-hoatch [house] village on the Oriental River. Nobody was excited and everybody treated us real well."

When daylight came the two prisoners were walked from village to village along a canal, stopping long enough at each village to eat or drink and have a cigarette. There was no attempt to demean them in front of the people and they were not abused—with one exception. In one village an old grandmother ran out and hit Camacho with a stick but was restrained by the guards. That night the Americans were put into boats which moved through a maze of canals that lost and disoriented them.

"They told us they were going to free us and send us back to Hiep Hoa. We thought for a while that maybe they would—it had happened before and by now it was obvious they weren't going to kill us. In the morning we stopped at yet another village and were eating some rice and fish when we were suddenly told to get moving. They ran us to the canal, put us on a boat and took us across. We no sooner got across the canal when B-26's started attacking the village. We hid in an inundated field all day while the B-26's and then helicopters bombed, strafed and rocketed the entire area—sometimes as close as 20 yards from our position."

That evening Smith and Camacho were taken to the village and were fed again. Then they were led to a small house where they found McClure lying on a bed-bench smoking a cigarette. He told them that he had been brought almost directly to the village and that Roraback was somewhere nearby. McClure's leg had been wounded by white phosphorous at Hiep Hoa, and he had not been taken with Roraback because he couldn't get around fast enough. Later all three were put in boats on the canal where they met another

boat with Roraback in it. Eventually they arrived at a small island, probably in the Plain of Reeds, where their captors built straw huts for them. It was Thanksgiving day, and they were to stay there until McClure's leg was healed well enough for him to walk. His wounds were opened to drain and he was given penicillin to prevent infection. The four men were well fed with rice, fish and duck. To their great surprise, neither before they arrived nor during their eight days on the island were they interrogated.

WHEN THEY LEFT THE SWAMPY AREA they stopped somewhere long enough to be issued black uniforms and to be photographed. Back in the boats, they continued on a northerly course until they could see Nuoi Ba Din—the "Black Virgin" mountain in Tay Ninh province. Soon the canal system ended and they were in primary jungle. After eight days of walking, the four prisoners and their escorts arrived at what appeared to be a permanent camp hidden under the heavy jungle canopy. During the four days they spent in the camp they were treated well, fed adequately and given cigarettes. They were then taken to another camp where a large cage made from stout wooden poles was awaiting them. The cage was about 12 by 14 feet, with two bamboo beds along each side and an eating table in the center. The cage made the men feel that their POW status was official.

The prisoners were issued mosquito nets, tin plates and cups and the inevitable cigarettes. The only "indoctrination" was in the form of signs with slogans, such as "You are committing the same ignominious crimes as the Ku Klux Klan is committing in the United States," which were posted up by a French-speaking guard. None of the four Americans spoke Vietnamese. Roraback had taken a cram course in French at Fort Bragg and Smith had received the same in Vietnamese, which meant that beyond "hello," "good-bye" and "thank you," they had no foreign language ability.

When Christmas approached, an English-speaking woman told them that they would receive a special meal for the occasion. To their surprise, it appeared—a whole pot full of chicken and six loaves of French bread. I asked Smith if that indicated the presence nearby of a village large enough to support a bakery. No, he replied, not too close. Their captors would walk as much as two days to get such things.

As the weeks passed, the captives continued to receive three meals a day, consisting mostly of ample portions of rice. On those occasions when rations were cut, they were told that their captors themselves were short. They were told by a woman, somewhere in her late forties and cruelly thin, "Do not worry. In some days men will come and explain to you"—a hint of possible forthcoming interrogation.

In the meantime, three one-man cages were built and the prisoners were separated, McClure being left in the large cage. The camp commander at this juncture was a man they called "Suave" because of his gentlemanly manners and the appearance he gave of having a good education. His interpreter was called "Prevaricator" because "he couldn't tell the truth even when he wanted to."

One day "Prevaricator" brought Smith a razor and told him to shave—for the first time in well over a month—because the cadre wished to have a conversation with him. He was taken to an area specially prepared for the meeting with

a table placed on a platform so that his interrogators had the psychological advantage of height. Two men sat behind the table and offered him tea, cigarettes and sugar candy. "Man with glasses" did most of the talking, explaining about the war and the American role in it. Similar three- or four-hour sessions went on almost daily for the better part of a week.

Smith refuses to call it brainwashing. There was no coercion, bright lights or psycho-physical preparation. He likens it more to the Army's own Troop Information classes. Finally he was asked to write a letter denouncing the United States' role in the war. He was further informed that he was not expected to give military information because the NLF had enough flowing from its people working for the military in Saigon.

Smith and—as he found out later—the other three refused. Pressure (but still not physical coercion) was then applied: 'We are your benefactors. It is much trouble to feed you and give you medical attention. We could even turn you loose in a large field and your own planes will shoot or bomb you.' Smith finally agreed to write a letter saying that he was wrong, that he shouldn't be in Viet-Nam and that the United States was fighting a war of aggression. Eventually all three wrote similar papers.

"They were very happy with that—it seemed to please them. Of course, back at Fort Bragg we had been warned against such things as that. But they also told us back at Fort Bragg that the Viet Cong had a reputation for killing prisoners. So I said 'Better look out for myself because apparently nobody gives a damn about me.' I had a bad attitude about the whole situation, probably feeling sorry for myself because I got into such a predicament. Besides, their detailed explanation of the war seemed to make a certain amount of sense."

The men's main motivation for writing the letter, however, was the promise that if their papers satisfied those at headquarters they would be freed. To give this weight, the men were shown bulletins stating that three or four other Americans had been released. Partly because they wanted to believe it, all three did. Another nudge toward belief was rice. Smith felt that if he had to eat rice one more month, he "would surely die."

A few days later, "Man with glasses," together with another Vietnamese who had been trained at Fort Bragg and Quantico and who talked about Fayetteville and Raleigh, came to say good-bye. The Americans were then told to pack their kits—soap, toothbrush, plate, cup, hammock, extra black uniform—and were moved a full day away to another camp. The camp was a large one, and at nights the NLF often lit huge fires and sang patriotic songs. The prisoners were kept segregated. The boring weeks became a month, and the interrogator's advice, "be patient, soon you will be released," grew thin.

AFTER FIVE MONTHS, DIVERSION CAME in the person of Wilfred Burchett, an overweight, white-haired westerner dressed in oversized black pajamas. Smith remembers being suspicious, thinking that Burchett might perhaps be some special interrogator. They only talked for perhaps ten minutes, and from Smith's point of view it wasn't very productive. He was careful to say no more than he had written in his statement five months before.

Burchett arrived at the height of Smith's "ornery period." Their conversation ended with Smith's chronic complaint

about too much rice and not having any bread. Burchett's rejoinder was something to the effect of, "Well they really do try their best, but it's not very easy, you know, to build a bread factory in the jungle." Smith did a fair imitation of Burchett's Australian accent and laughed at the recollection. "When he said that, I cracked up. I looked at the jungle and at my situation, and all things considered what could be funnier than building a bread factory for four prisoners. For months after, every time I got depressed I'd think of Burchett's remark and start laughing all over again."

Smith recalls the situation and Burchett with wry fondness. Before the journalist left, the men were brought together for the first time in five months to have their picture taken. When Burchett returned from the jungles, the photograph was wired around the world, and for the first time there was positive proof that the men were alive and well.

The separation of the prisoners ended after Burchett's visit, evidently because the NLF was happy with the answers the GI's gave to the outsider. Smith said: "Didn't tell him anything I hadn't already said in my statement . . . like I believed the United States was in the wrong. 'Course I still feel this way myself now. The more I learn the more I think they're barking up the wrong tree over there . . . a lot of foolishness." The men could now converse together on work details cutting dead trees for firewood with "those Donald Duck axes hammered out of old beer cans." The work wasn't pleasant—millions of ants lived in the dead trees—but it was a welcome relief from boredom.

Again they moved camp; again "Man with glasses" appeared for further "explanations." He wanted more statements. The word was passed among the four not to do business this time because their promised release hadn't materialized. Questioned individually, each man said, "We made statements before and we are still prisoners, so no more statements."

"You could have been released now but the last time you wrote a paper you say nothing," was the interrogator's angry reply. "'Course he was right about that, 'cause we had just written a bunch of double-talk—it didn't mean anything if someone read it. He told me my attitude was very bad—that I was the worst, and they were tired of it. Once I had a bad flap with the camp commander because I refused to sweep out the guard's shack, and of course I complained a lot."

The GI's filled in the days working on the rice mill and occasionally playing volleyball. Christmas—their second in captivity—was approaching, and again the signs pointing to release looked good. Then one day Smith and Camacho were on their bunks talking, ignoring a young guard, perhaps 17 years old, who was playing with a MAT-49 submachine gun. He was pulling the bolt back and forth when suddenly the gun went off, spewing about four bullets, one of which went through Smith's leg. The NLF were very apologetic and chastised the guard. They treated the wound, but it took almost three months to heal.

Around Christmas, "Suave" was replaced by a new camp commander who was immediately dubbed "Oil Can Harry" because of his attitude toward the GI's. For the first time they were coerced into doing work under the threat of having all food withheld. "Harry wanted the prisoners to sharpen punji's"—the long, finely sharpened bamboo stakes used to impale those careless enough to step into camouflaged pits near trails, etc. Threatened with guns and placed in pits in

the ground, the four GI's held out until the prospects of starvation became real.

The prisoners were moved to various camps bearing such names as "Iron Mines" and "Big River." On a short visit to the familiar base camp, they met two more English-speaking cadre, "Alex" and "Grandpa." "Alex," whose English was almost flawless, gave them news of the war, but "Grandpa" gave them bad news and a warning: make propaganda tape recordings or their safety could not be guaranteed. If they refused to cooperate, it would be concluded that they were enemies of the Front. Eventually Smith and McClure made tapes saying essentially what they had written a year before.

Moved to a new area, the GI's were put to building their own cages and some extras. At an information session one day "Alex" told the men that new prisoners would be coming. The new prisoners were Captain Cook, a Marine, and Corporal Crass, an Army radio operator. Evidently the men had been captured on separate occasions when the ARVN they were advising deserted them in the field. Another man, a sergeant who had been with the two newcomers, had come down sick. "Prevaricator" later told the men that he had been killed trying to escape.

Cook was not treated with the same considerations as were the four Special Forces prisoners, perhaps due to his rank, but more likely because he and the sergeant had almost beaten a guard to death in an escape attempt. The escape was foiled by a guard clamping down on Cook's thumb and almost biting it off. Cook and Crass were kept in individual cages, but Smith and Camacho shared a cage, as did Roraback and McClure.

Smith and Camacho, using a system of "dead-drop" notes left at the well in a medicine bottle, kept the captain informed about the camp and what could be expected. They also kept him up to date on an escape plan they were formulating. Roraback and McClure had rejected the plan on the grounds that even if they got away, they would never be able to find their way out of the jungle. The captain, however, agreed that the escape could work, and Smith and Camacho continued planning. It was decided that if both men escaped their absence would be noted almost immediately, but if one stayed, the other could get a good headstart. Smith was elected to stay. Camacho made good his escape shortly after dark and wasn't missed until wake-up the following morning.

After the guard recovered from his shock at finding a prisoner had escaped almost before his very eyes, the camp was alerted and the NLF sent patrols out in all directions. The other prisoners were immediately chained hand and foot and to each other. The guards indicated that Camacho had been recaptured and shot. When the fourth day arrived and the camp was not moved, the remaining prisoners suspected that such might be the case. That day "Alex" called Smith, Roraback and McClure to his area for a tongue-lashing, telling them that some guerrillas had been executed in Saigon and that retaliation was called for. All three were convinced that they were to be executed.

That night the NLF broke camp and marched the prisoners night and day for 30 or 40 miles. The guards, having caught hell for the escape and now having to force-march, were surly. For the first and only time Smith saw them abuse a prisoner. Crass, who was having leg trouble, couldn't keep up and the guards kicked him a few times. He was finally left with two guards to catch up later.

THE NEW CAMP WAS A LARGE ONE. Bombings were now a daily event; every morning jets and Al-E's bombed within two or three hundred yards of the prisoners' camp. Smith says that the noise of the oncoming planes was "fearsome" and that the shock waves from the exploding bombs hurt the eardrums. The strikes always came from the same direction and were the same distance away; the frightened prisoners assumed it was only a matter of time until a plane dropped short or long, wiping them all out.

By now it was September, 1965. When the prisoners were not in their bomb trenches, they were in hammocks, one leg chained to a supporting tree. Roraback and Cook were chained to the same tree, and Roraback, contrary to repeated orders, persisted in conversing with the captain. Finally "Oil Can Harry" himself came down and, through "Prevaricator," told Roraback that if he refused to obey orders his safety could no longer be guaranteed. Roraback's response was to laugh in the camp commander's face; the commander, without another word but with the blood rising in his face, turned and walked away.

Roraback had been a difficult captive, even for his fellow prisoners. He often took more than his share of the food and the guards as a result called him *Con lon* (pig). The healthiest of the lot, he refused to share equally in the work, feigning a bad back or trying to use the weight of his rank (he outranked Smith and McClure) to get the others to do his work for him. All three at one time or another wanted to punch him out. None of these things had gone unnoticed by the guards. In the information classes Roraback argued as forcibly with the interrogators as he often did with his three companions. Because he was the oldest of the four, the Vietnamese assumed he was the "senior" man or leader and as such was responsible for Camacho's escape. Moreover, of the two men who didn't make a tape, Camacho was gone and Roraback (the man they believed responsible for the escape) was obnoxious.

A day or so later, the interpreter came and told Roraback that he was wanted for an interview, and to pack his hammock and the rest of his gear. The following morning the Americans heard two shots; they never saw Roraback again. Smith assumed he had been shot, but Captain Cook doubted it. The Vietnamese did not tell the men that the NLF had publicly announced that Sergeant First Class Kenneth Roraback had been executed in retaliation for the execution of an NLF guerrilla in Saigon; neither did they use the event to intimidate the prisoners.

More time passed and the men were in cages again—the enlisted men in one, the two officers in another. Having given up hope of being freed, Smith and McClure were once again informed by "Alex" that they would definitely be released. He told them about the peace movement, that most people in the United States were opposed to the war, and that in response to these peace-loving Americans they were to be set free.

"He told us two people—he mentioned Norman Morrison by name—had killed themselves to oppose the war and that the NLF was giving back two people to help replace the American people's great loss. They wanted the American people to know that they understood their loss. We were told we could be the two, but first they wanted another paper written. This time, however, they wanted only for us to ask for release and tell how we had been treated while prisoners.

"I told Captain Cook about it and that I was going to do

it. Actually the paper had nothing to do with our release, because I wrote the paper one day and they moved us out the next. The Viet Cong had a big feast for us, offering toasts, good luck and so on. We walked for about four days on what seemed like a fairly straight line and stopped for two days in sight of the border—we could see the Cambodian flag at an outpost—while crossing arrangements were made. On the second day it was announced that cars were waiting on the other side, and a squad walked with us directly to the border, less than an hour away. The squad turned around at the border and one man, Le Van Duyet, I think, and the interpreter crossed over with us. After some talk with the Cambodian officials, the interpreter also returned to Viet-Nam, but Le Van Duyet accompanied us all the way to Phnom Penh.

“The first main town we saw was Svay Rieng and shortly we were in Phnom Penh. We were taken to Police Headquarters, photographed in our Viet Cong uniforms, then somebody was sent to get us regular clothes and they took more pictures. Next they took us to a real nice hotel, the Royale, I think, and we could have anything we wanted. It was really nice, individual rooms, beds, showers, and the food was really great.”

The two men were still somewhat uncertain about their status even though everyone was very friendly and tried to reassure them that they really were free. They were even suspicious of the Australians who approached them. On the second day Smith and McClure were presented at a press conference held at the Ministry of Information and after some sightseeing and a visit to a night club while arrangements were being made, the two GI's flew to Bangkok, accompanied by the Australians.

They were met by, among others, members of U.S. Counter-Intelligence, who greeted them with a reading of Article 31 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice—the military rights against self-incrimination. On the way to the Philippines they got more of the same, and of course instead of going home they were shipped to Okinawa. Le Van Duyet had wanted Smith and McClure to take another route home, possibly through Europe, and had told the men that if they went to the U.S. military in Bangkok, they would be put in jail. “Of course I couldn't imagine such a thing. I didn't know what was going on in the world and the only thing I knew about the peace movement was what the NLF had told me. I didn't know until I got to Okinawa that ‘peace movement’ was a dirty word and that they looked upon discussing it as treason. It wasn't long before I began to think Le Van Duyet was right.”

IT HAD BEEN TWO LONG YEARS—a period filled with uncertainty, anger, sickness and boredom. Now three years later, in his slow, quiet, sometimes humorous West Virginian drawl, Smith took a long time in telling about it. Yet, it could easily be condensed: a short period of fear and apprehension resulting from what he had been told by Special Forces to expect if he were ever taken prisoner, followed by months of frustration and tedium. Fully expecting to be shot immediately or subjected to excruciating torture, Smith was not even beaten and had to concede that he was well provided for under extreme circumstances. He hardly expected what followed his release from captivity.

Told they would be home in two days, he and McClure instead were sent to Okinawa, and home was as far away as

ever. The Army now replaced the NLF as captor. Restricted to NLF information about the world for two years, the men now had to rely on the U.S. military for their frame of reference. The clothes, food and housing were different, but there were still interrogators and other intimidations.

Having again formally apprised the two men of their rights under Article 31, the Army began the “debriefing” in earnest. Questioned separately by two teams of three men each, Smith and McClure were told that anything they could relate about Viet Cong methods, habits, manners, personalities, etc. would be a great service to the Army. For three weeks they were taken step by step back through the two years' captivity. Too late, the men discovered that they weren't operating under Article 31 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, but under Article 32—pre-trial investigation—and that everything they had said was to be used as the grounds for their courts-martial. Almost at the end, at what Smith thought was to be another “normal” session, an officer told him: “It is my duty to inform you that you are suspected to be guilty of violation of the Uniform Code of Military Justice under the provisions of Article 104—aiding the enemy.” He also named other articles that Smith was suspected of violating, but 104 was enough—it carries the death penalty.

As soon as debriefing was completed, the men were taken to Fort Buckner. “I met my commanding officer for the first time. Somehow or another I thought I was still in Special Forces but it turned out I was in Headquarters Company, Fort Buckner.” The meeting was brief, just long enough to read the formal charges for trial by court-martial.

During this whole period Smith and McClure were held incommunicado. Incoming and outgoing mail was censored—even before the men were charged—and they were not offered defense counsel until after debriefing and after the charges had been released to the press. Then, of course, it was military counsel. The army heightened the isolation of the two men by moving them to a small camp at the north end of the island. To inquiries from peace and/or political groups and from the ACLU, the military replied that the men were assigned to “normal” duties. Although they were occasionally permitted to go to town, they were always accompanied by security officers. Again weeks drifted into months; both men were now almost two years past their normal date of discharge.

“They pulled a real cute little caper on us just before they finally discharged us. Captain Nelson [one of their defense attorneys] had warned us not to say anything else to 'em unless he was present. The colonel from the Judge Advocate's office sent someone from the Intelligence Corps up to get me, supposedly to go to the hospital for a physical examination at Fort Buckner. As soon as I left, another intelligence officer started questioning McClure at Camp Hardy. After he started, this officer phoned Captain Nelson to say he was interrogating McClure, that if he wanted to be there to protect his client, he'd better hurry up and get there because he was going to continue. I wasn't taken to the hospital, and pretty soon they started interrogating me and wanted me to give testimony against McClure. They gave up that plan when they saw it wouldn't work and offered a deal: if we would waive a board hearing they would give us a discharge other than an honorable discharge.”

By now, after three weeks of testimony provided by the men themselves and three months of investigation, it was

obvious that the Army either didn't have enough evidence to convict on the charges or had decided that a trial would embarrass the military. Warned that if they didn't accept the deal they could be court-martialed and that if they insisted on a board hearing, the case could drag out for six more months, the two men accepted. Just as they had had to sign a final paper to gain their freedom from the NLF, they also had to sign one to gain freedom from the U.S. military.

Throughout its harassment of the two men, the military emphatically denied that Smith's statement about the peace movement in any way accounted for their bizarre treatment. Sergeant Camacho, however—the man who escaped with Smith's help—was awarded a Silver Star on his return to the United States. President Johnson made a personal trip to Texas to pin the medal on Camacho's chest. George Smith is not interested in denying Camacho this high honor, but points out that while he was a prisoner, Sergeant Camacho dug holes, sharpened punji stakes, milled rice and *wrote the same statements as Smith and McClure*. Furthermore, he is still in Special Forces and still retains either a Secret or Top Secret security clearance.

If the contrast between the treatment of Camacho and of the other two men points up the absurdity of the Code of Conduct, then the "deal" Smith and McClure were offered must be the last word on the ridiculousness of military security and military justice. As part of the "deal," both men were forbidden to describe their captivity and specifically to discuss the Christmas dinner and Red Cross bundles given them by the NLF. Why? With the possible exception of the particulars of Camacho's escape, there was absolutely nothing not known to the NLF. As usual, "secret" was stamped on information not to deny it to any enemy but to deny it to the American people. Having branded Smith and McClure "turncoats," the military then denied them the right to clear themselves publicly.

I mentioned that when Smith went to Viet-Nam there was no peace movement and in 1965 all he knew of it was what the NLF had told him. What impressions did he have now?

"Well it's hard to say. You don't hear much about them these days. Most people in this country still think we're protecting ourselves over there, which is nonsense. How we got involved there is another story, but why we stay there is beyond me—of course if we pull out we lose face. It's quite a predicament we got ourselves into there. We can't win militarily, unless we annihilate all the Vietnamese people—I said that in one of my statements and I still believe it.

"Yes, I feel the U.S. military should get out. I can't see where they've accomplished a damned thing. Hell, things were bad in '63. But we controlled things better then than we do now, and in those days, including civilians, we only had 25,000 Americans."

I told him that many people are opposed to the idea of a coalition government because they are convinced that it would only mean the country would become communist. Given his background and his everyday frame of reference, his response almost floored me.

"Well, if that's the way it goes, what can we do about it—stay over there fighting for another 20 years? If the people are inclined to go communist, we certainly aren't going to be able to stop 'em. In open free elections it would undoubtedly go communist, because the only people who would vote otherwise are the people in Saigon who profit from the military

buildup there. The elections held recently are meaningless. Nothing has changed since '63 in that respect. I remember our interpreter at Hiep Hoa. He wanted the day off to go vote. I asked him who he was going to vote for and he said Madame Nhu. I asked him who else was running and he said nobody, just Madame Nhu. The names have changed, that's all. The voting and candidate restrictions make the elections meaningless. Communists aren't allowed to run or vote, so what is proved? The people we're supporting and in turn who support us are a special clique and don't represent any cross-section in the country.

"A lot of people have different impressions about communism. I don't really see anything bad in it, in how it would be used over there, and if communism can help them I see nothing wrong with it. Those people have nothing now and the communists sure as hell can't take that away from them. The only thing they could possibly do is help them to help themselves. I can't see the system of free enterprise possibly working there. The Indians would end up still owning all the shops like they do now, and the Vietnamese would be exploited as they have been for many years. The poor farmers would continue to be poor and a certain faction in Saigon would run the country, and they would be overtaxed just like under the Ngo family. In countries like Viet-Nam I can't see how anything other than socialism can work; otherwise the country will be run by the few people that have money and everything will be as it always has been. Free enterprise hasn't done a damned thing for West Virginia, people can't afford to live there anymore, and it sure can't do anything for Viet-Nam. In fact some of the places in West Virginia look just like some of those poor villages in Viet-Nam—there's poverty both places. 'Course you mention socialism here and it's immediately equated with communism—something bad. And as for the U.S. military, they really have the American people buffaloed and bullied."

IT HAD BEEN THREE YEARS SINCE I HAD first met him. To a person in San Francisco or New York, the life George Smith led during this period may seem contradictory. He is anti-military and resentful of the way the Army treated him, but he draws a disability pension (for his leg wounds) and belongs to the VFW. He has a yearning to travel, "perhaps even to California," but so far he has managed only to move a stone's throw from his mother's house in West Virginia across the bridge to East Liverpool, Ohio.

He is married, has two small children and is rebuilding a house financed on a GI loan. With its new facade, heating system and other modifications, his home stands out from those of his neighbors. The town is dying; the pottery business which justified its existence is defunct and there is no other industry to take its place. And yet, given his past and day-to-day environment, George Smith's three years have been straight ahead. You get the impression that if he lived in another community he would be leading living-room discussions or the next Vets Against the War protest. He has worked it out for himself from observation and experience, bolstered by night school courses in political science. He is part of the peace movement whether he realizes it or not. From NLF prisoner to U.S. Army prisoner to prisoner of a dying part of the country—Smith may yet realize his freedom.
