



Life Photo

Prisoners in the Conson Island prison "tiger cages" in a photograph released in July, 1970, by Life magazine.

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Phuquoc Major Red Cross Concern

Conditions in Camp Called 'Stinking, Rotten, Catastrophic'

By Joseph Novitski

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One year after what was to become the largest prisoner-of-war camp in South Vietnam opened on Phuquoc Island, two International Red Cross doctors examined 1,000 prisoners there and reported that at least 5 per cent definitely had been beaten by their guards.

From that moment in mid-1968 on the Phuquoc camp, which grew to hold 30,000 persons, became the major concern for the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) mission to Vietnam. The Swiss ICRC

doctors and delegates visited it 15 times in five years, and their normally dry language showed strain in the reports from Phuquoc.

There are adjectives like "stinking," "catastrophic," and "rotten" in the thick file. Inmates, the Red Cross reported, were punished by guards who beat them, sometimes fatally, with fists, clubs, iron bars, hammers and dried stingray tails.

Over the years, Red Cross inspectors, who gave satisfactory marks to most prison facilities in Vietnam, found evidence at Phuquoc of months of solitary confinement on starvation ra-

tions of rice and salt, "totally inadequate" medical care for prisoners, mass punishments by day long exposure to the tropical sun and individual punishment by confinement in waist-high barbed wire enclosures called "tiger cages."

"Like the man said," recalled Lt. Col. Donald E. Treaster, who led a 39-man U.S. advisory team at Phuquoc camp for six months, "I never saw a tiger in one."

Physical punishment, restricted rations and disciplinary confinement of over 48 hours are forbidden by the 1949 Geneva convention governing the treatment of pris-

oners of war. Although Vietnamese said they expected such things in prisons, American advisers were stationed at Phuquoc from the beginning with orders to make the camp comply with the convention.

It was not easy, Treaster and his predecessor, Lt. Col. Charles D. Gooch, said in recent telephone interviews.

"The only thing we as advisers could do was counsel, advise and remind our (Vietnamese) counterparts of the need to comply," said Gooch, who is now stationed at Ft. Leavenworth Kan. The Vietnamese army colonels who ran the camp, he said, were in command.

Their effectiveness, and that of the adviser relationship, are reflected in the Red Cross reports on Phuquoc which give the most revealing account of how bad Vietnamese prison camp conditions could be.

As the reports show conditions improving, relapsing and improving again over five years, they also seem to demonstrate the weakness of the only source of Red Cross power: moral pressure

brought without any publicity.

The reasons conditions improved or deteriorated at Phuquoc are not recorded in the reports. U.S. advisers like Treaster and Gooch thought the changes coincided with changes in camp commandants and that the United States contributed advice, equipment and material to make Phuquoc more livable.

One former Red Cross inspector said he thought the U.S. advisers he had seen there did "an extraordinary job," but stopped short of giving them all credit for improvements.

Founded in June, 1967, Phuquoc camp grew rapidly and almost constantly with the war. People were transferred there in streams from the five mainland POW camps at Danang, Pleiku, Cantho, Quinhon and Bienhoa. At the time of the last Red Cross report, in 1972, it held 30,000 POWs, the oldest of whom was 74.

Senior ICRC officials twice during the war flew from Geneva to Vietnam, according to the reports and interviews with ICRC staff

ers, specifically to visit Phuquoc. They apparently wanted to demonstrate the depth of their concern occasioned by reports of nightmarish conditions from their delegates in the field.

"We have no means of pressure except the moral ones," Louis Jaquet, an ICRC official who went to Phuquoc on one such mission, said in a telephone interview.

That pressure was exerted most strongly in the report written after a six-day visit to the camp in May, 1971. At that time the camp held more than 27,000 POWs—about the same population as College Park, Md.

This report, like hundreds of others, was sent to Geneva and forwarded to Washington and Saigon. In addition, American escort officers and advisers immediately reported the ICRC visit, as they did all others on special forms to their superiors in the U.S. military command in Saigon.

The ICRC delegation formally accused the Vietnamese camp commander of permitting violations of 12 of the 125 basic articles of the Geneva convention on prisoners of war. The officer answered that he was doing what he could with what he had.

The delegates had found widespread evidence of beatings and had seen guards knock prisoners around with clubs.

They had gathered evidence of four suspicious deaths among the 60 listed at the camp in the preceding four months, and they had found four beating tools, two of them clubs with bloodstains on them, in one camp guardhouse.

The other two instruments were a stingray's tail over two feet long only with a cloth handle and a flat

metal bar with a screw point sticking from it.

"The conditions of treatment of the POWs present a character of unquestionable gravity," the report concluded. "In the opinion of the ICRC delegates, there exists now at Phuquoc a systematic application of maltreatment, permanently, in all sectors."

When the inspectors returned four months later, they found a new camp commander, Lt. Col. Bui Bang Duc, and credited him with making some improvement.

Still, they cited him formally for violations of the Geneva convention. The ICRC had seen temporary improvements before, in 1969 and again for a while in 1970.

However, in January, 1972, the ICRC mission visiting Phuquoc concluded that "the considerable improvement in treatment is the most positive point of this visit," and credited Duc. And in the February, 1972, report, the last in the file,

the ICRC found Phuquoc without tiger cages for the first time since shortly after its founding.

"In general terms," the last ICRC report available concluded, "mistreatment no longer exists at the Phuquoc camp."