

The Prison Raid Raised Hopes...

By BARBARA ONDRASIK

The daring commando raid on the P.O.W. camp near Hanoi just before Thanksgiving could be termed a failure militarily in that it did not achieve its primary objective — the rescue of Americans held prisoner there. But in terms of morale, the raid was outstanding.

Most of the families of the nearly 1,600 men missing in action or held prisoner in Southeast Asia were delighted. Finally, after all these agonizing years, somebody was doing something. The P.O.W. issue finally—and rightfully — had become front page news all over the world.

Most important, what a morale boost this must have given the men! (God will they hear about it!) For years they have been slowly rotting in barbaric cells, barely subsisting on thin soup and thick bread, with nothing to do, no one to talk to, not allowed to communicate by mail with their families.

Don't the families worry about retaliation? Certainly. But that's a fear we're accustomed to. We've been living with it for years—some of us for as long as seven years. It was fear that kept the prisoner issue quiet for so long. But it was fear, also, that finally brought it out in the open. Fear for the men. Fear for the mental and physical toll that seemingly endless years of isolation and deprivation have taken upon them.

Recent communiqués from the Liaison Committee established by Hanoi to handle mail between prisoners held in North Vietnam and their families here haven't helped. Granted, the Committee has delivered more mail in the past two years than has come out in all the previous four years, but still only 329 men have been heard from. There have been 790 fliers downed over the North. What happened to the other 461? Information released recently by Mrs. Cora Weiss of the Liaison Committee lists names of many men who, it is said, "have never been identified from pictures or other

The wisdom of the American raid on the North Vietnamese prisoner of war camp last month has been deplored and defended, militarily and politically. Both authors of these conflicting articles are vitally concerned about the fate of the P.O.W.'s. Barbara Ondrasik is with the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia. Her brother, a Navy lieutenant, has been missing in action since July, 1968. Cora Weiss is co-chairman, Committee of Liaison with Families of Servicemen Detained in North Vietnam. She visited Hanoi in December, 1969.

sources." Now the North Vietnamese say they're not there and have never been there.

So, where are they? If they have died in prison, the North Vietnamese should be held accountable by the rest of the world. It is an unthinkable criminal act if prisoners of war have been allowed to die, unidentified, uncared for. There is no possible excuse for a civilized country to allow this to happen.

But the North Vietnamese have continually ignored all provisions of the Geneva Conventions, which they signed. Not one prisoner has ever been officially identified; prison facilities have never been inspected impartially; and while some prisoners are now writing their families six-line notes, this is only a recent development (and probably a result of the public outcry in the past two years). Still, too many have never been heard from.

Time is running out for these men. Too many may have died already. The families' anxiety and frustration is giving way to despair. In no other armed conflict in history have families of military men been exploited in this manner. Why should young women

have to exist in a hellish limbo—neither wife nor widow—with no hope of starting a new life and no assurance that her old life, so cruelly torn apart by this war, will ever be mended.

A columnist recently criticized the Sontay raid, saying the only hope for satisfactory resolution of the prisoner-of-war situation is "patient negotiation." How long is patient? Seven years? Ten years? Twenty years? The light seems to have gone out at the end of this tunnel. Our Government has gone down every avenue to secure humane treatment for these men. Nothing has worked. The North Vietnamese simply will not negotiate this issue.

While most of the families approved of the Sontay raid (and all are eternally grateful to the brave men who volunteered for the mission) they do not endorse similar raids for the future, due to the lack of sufficient intelligence to insure their success. We are, however, wholeheartedly in favor of continuous, concerted efforts on behalf of the men in captivity who have suffered too much, too long. Most of us feel strongly that a resolution of the P.O.W. issue would go a long way toward securing peace in Vietnam—at the negotiating table.

But patience doesn't mean forever. And more and more of us are feeling now if North Vietnam won't negotiate, we can't afford to stand around and wait patiently while American men are dying in Asian prisons. As P.O.W. wife Mrs. Louise Mulligan put it recently: "We've lost this war because we haven't won it. I'm not a hawk or dove, but if you can't win, get the men out. They say we must get out with dignity. What do they want me to do, walk behind a casket waving an American flag with dignity?"

The civilized world cannot permit North Vietnam to continue its inhumane treatment of American prisoners. And the United States cannot wait to negotiate if it means an advance payment of 1,600 dead prisoners. Something must be done—and soon.

... But It Avoided the Real Facts

By CORA WEISS

In the last two weeks the Nixon Administration has not only escalated the war in Vietnam but also the hot rhetoric around the prisoner-of-war issue which it needs to gain support for a win-the-war policy. In so doing it has engaged in gross distortions of fact and deliberate distractions.

The Administration, Mr. H. Ross Perot, and various national and local organizations including the Bell Telephone Company, have spent millions of dollars deceiving the American public about the P.O.W. issue, so that even The New York Times, in its editorial of Dec. 3, can make the wholly unsupported statement that Hanoi "has failed to identify prisoners . . . or to permit a free exchange of mail."

The facts are available. On April 6, 1970, the North Vietnamese conveyed an official list of 335 names of U.S. servicemen it holds prisoner to the Committee on Liaison, which released them to concerned families and the press. On Nov. 11 four new names were added and as of now 339 men are known to be in North Vietnam.

Since an agreement was reached with Hanoi in December, 1969, to establish a channel for communication between prisoners and their families, and for information regarding the status of men missing over North Vietnam, over 2,500 letters have been received from 331 P.O.W.'s, and replies to 104 status inquiries have been conveyed to families.

Six-pound packages containing vitamins, canned foods, instant drinks, sweets, toilet articles, travel games, art supplies and clothing are allowed every other month with a special Christmas bonus of an 11-lb. package.

These are sent with the aid of the U.S. Government by air via Geneva and Moscow. Letters are sent to Hanoi by post as well as by hand. Mail comes from prisoners exclusively by hand to guarantee its safe arrival. It is distributed by the Committee of Liaison.

The recent theatrics of the Pentagon in sending a so-called search-and-rescue mission into Son Tay were apparently intended to prove to wives and prisoners that the Government had not "forgotten our men." Ignoring the unconscionably long war, the fact that traditionally prisoners are exchanged at the end of a war, that nine men had been released with the aid of the peace movement (and more might have been had not Lieut. Robert Frishman embarked on a full-time campaign of telling torture tales of highly dubious credibility), Secretary Melvin Laird tried to further justify his failure with misrepresentations of fact.

He stated that the raid was prompted by recent information that men were "dying in captivity of ill treatment" and later intimated that 22 men were known to have perished in this fashion. Five of these names were brought back from Hanoi last December by a Women Strike for Peace delegation, of which I was a member, with the information that the men had died some years earlier when their planes crashed in North Vietnam. Two additional groups of six and eleven names were received by the Committee of Liaison on Nov. 11 and 22, respectively, and reported within 24 hours to the State Department. On Tuesday, Nov. 24, Secretary Laird told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee he had received names "over the past month, and within the last week."

Would it not have been more truthful simply to say "yesterday"?

Skillful questions by Senators Fulbright, Aiken, Gore and Pell revealed that, in fact, the raid was planned and orders to execute it were given long before the new lists of seventeen names reached the Pentagon. There is no foundation for the charge that these are deaths in captivity.

The explanation given in Hanoi is that this category includes death upon crashing, death from exposure or starvation following descent in an unpopulated area, death after capture from wounds or disease.

One may well ask: How "humane" is it of the Defense Department to aggravate the anguish of P.O.W. families by releasing, for propaganda purposes, unfounded stories about "mistreatment and death in captivity"? How humane is it to advise families not to deal with the Committee of Liaison, which is the only available reliable channel for exchange of mail.

As for inspection, perhaps the current threats of the Administration to free the prisoners by "any means necessary" shed some light on the reluctance of the North Vietnamese to disclose the location of the camps.

The favorite word of Administration spokesmen in describing the treatment of P.O.W.'s is "barbaric." John Van Dyke, a former State Department employe who has examined the evidence, concludes: "The North Vietnamese have probably treated their captives better than any other nation fighting in Asia during this century."

The only solution for the safe return of all P.O.W.'s held by the North as well as the N.L.F. is to set the date for the total withdrawal of our troops.