

A Prison Interview

POW Denies Being

The following dispatch was filed before the United States' announcement of an indefinite suspension of the Paris peace talks. The writer is a freelance journalist who won the Pulitzer Prize in 1970 for his disclosure of the My Lai massacre.

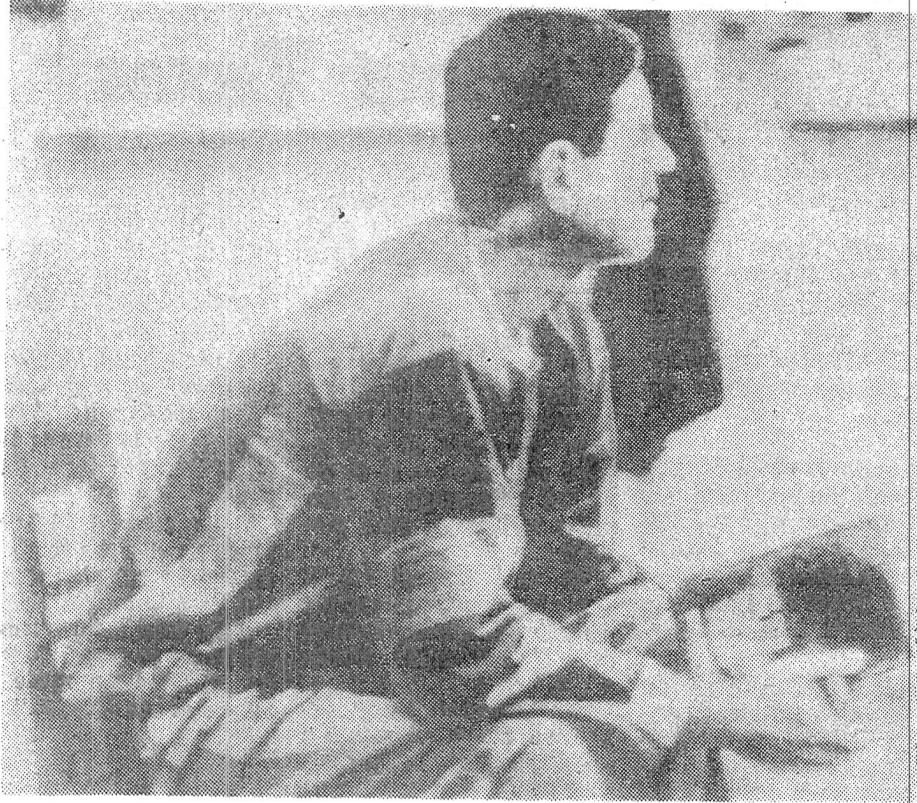
By Seymour M. Hersh
N. Y. Times Service

Hanoi

North Vietnamese officials appears to view the discussion in the United States over the treatment of American prisoners as something foisted on the public by the White House in an attempt to divert attention from the issue everyone here constantly talks about—settling the war through negotiation.

A series of interviews with officials in the last two weeks also indicated that further releases of prisoners were unlikely, as was any change in North Vietnam's policy on the prisoner issue.

Many officials professed not to understand why the many newspaper and television interviews with captured pilots had not persuaded more Americans that the men were receiving better and adequate care.



MARINE LT. COL. EDISON W. MILLER IN PRISON
'I have never been tortured and I have never been beaten'

BLAME

President Nixon is constantly blamed for what is said here to be systematic misrepresentation.

"This question of prisoners is a matter Nixon will stick to," Col Ha Van Lau, North Vietnam's roving ambassador to the Paris peace talks, said in an interview, "because it is a point of great concern to the American people. It is also a question of humanity of men to men. He will continue to make distortions and frauds about it."

Most Western diplomats stationed in Hanoi are convinced that the over-all treatment of prisoners is good and constantly improving, but some voice doubt about their emotional well-being.

An attache told of a talk, shortly after the air war ended, with a Hanoi official who complained of the inability of the American pilots to develop a faith or belief to sustain them. The official noted with some amazement, the source said, that the pilots seemed to break down within weeks after capture, particularly after finding that they would not be subjected to torture or systematic mistreatment.

FAILURE

Lau and other officials, who refused to discuss emotional difficulties, did not seem to realize that inter-

Mistreated

Viet Cong Envoy Criticizes U.S.

Paris

Nguyen Thi Binh, the Viet Cong foreign minister, accused the United States yesterday of "sabotaging" the Vietnam peace talks and declared that the people "will continue their just struggle" if Washington refuses to negotiate.

Mrs. Binh, returning to Paris by way of Hanoi, Pe-

king and Moscow after an absence of more than six months, gave no indication whether she was bringing a new peace plan.

She told an airport news conference that the United States showed an "impudent attitude" in indefinitely suspending the peace talks Thursday.

Associated Press

views with a few carefully selected pilots in a less than open atmosphere fell short of demonstrating the adequacy of treatment.

In an interview of more than half an hour, a Marine, Lieutenant Colonel Edison W. Miller of Tustin, Calif., who was captured late in 1967, described his imprisonment as being marked by gradual easing of daily routine and constant improvement in food and living conditions.

The only other interview permitted was with a prisoner held for less than a month.

A visitor had no basis to doubt Miller's statements, although under the circumstances the pilot was not in a position to complain. It was impossible to determine whether Hanoi considered him a typical prisoner, but it should be noted that the vast majority have never been seen or interviewed either by journalists or by visiting leaders of the antiwar movement in the United States.

STATEMENT

Miller, who was shot down on Oct. 13, 1967, while piloting an F-4 over the southern part of North Vietnam, began the interview by responding to a question about alleged mistreatment. "I

have never been tortured and I have never been beaten," he said.

Choosing his words carefully, he added: "In my opinion the treatment has always been satisfactory, and today I would say that in the recent few years the treatment is good. As far as I'm concerned the treatment has never been bad. We are prisoners. There is no doubt in our minds."

The 40-year-old pilot, a tall man who seemed slender but fit, acknowledged that in the early days of his imprisonment, "when the bombing was still going on heavy, there were hard feelings. If you were antagonistic you were asking for trouble sometimes," he continued, "but it was not policy and it depended on your personal behavior."

DESCRIPTIONS

Similar descriptions of prison life during the height of the bombing have been supplied by some of the nine men released to the antiwar groups in 1968 and 1969 by North Vietnam. None have been freed since.

"Let me say," Miller said, "that the Vietnamese position is constant improvement in accordance with what they're capable of giving us. In my opinion

they've fulfilled it to the letter, even while the bombing was going on. They are constantly always trying to improve the food and camp routine."

Only three topics were forbidden during the talk: The number of prisoners in Miller's camp, its location and its administrative procedures. No television cameramen or photographers were present. Also absent was any sign of the North Vietnamese Army men who run the camps.

INTERPRETER

The only official to monitor the conversation — at least the only official in sight — was an interpreter who worked at the camp. The interview was recorded on tape, and it was possible to make a verbatim transcript.

Miller reported that sometime in 1970 the North Vietnamese abandoned their policy of providing two-and-four-man living units and placed many of the prisoners in groups of 26 that operated with a sort of collective autonomy.

"We're not separated at all," he said. "We're all living in a large building with several rooms — more like a barracks style. They pre-



COL. HA VAN LAU
A diplomat's view

pare the meals in a central building and deliver them to each building."

Asked, in effect, how he had managed to keep his balance and bearings, he replied:

"First off, right from the very beginning we have always received books, many books to read. And for some time now we've received many language books and mathematics books — calculus, trig — way beyond most of us. There's quite a language-study group going on, and we have French, Spanish, German and Russian."

BOOKS

Asked which books he had read recently, he said "the Pentagon Papers."

Seeming poised and in good spirits, he showed a sense of humor. He grew se-

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rious, though when he began talking about his family.

"My wife and my five sons are — as far as I know — still living in California," he said, explaining that his wife talked a lot in letters about moving.

He said he received and sent letters with regularity and also got five or six packages a year.

When he was asked if there was anything he wanted to relay to his wife, he said: "There's no special message. She knows that I love her and she knows that I miss her. I hope she's keeping herself well informed and doing what she thinks is necessary."

GLOOM

During inevitable gloomy periods when he thinks of his family, he noted a moment later, he tells himself "that I'm still alive, that I'm not crippled and that the Vietnamese have suffered much worse than I have.

Discussing the diet, which he said was "more than satisfactory" in general he said:

"We receive fresh fruit every day, mostly bananas, oranges and other kinds of tropical fresh fruit. We receive a cup of hot milk every day with sugar in it — every morning except Sunday morning. Sundays are a two-meal day, but every other day we have three meals a day starting with hot bread, hot fresh bread every morning, and sometimes coffee instead of the milk.

"Late in the morning we receive bread; all the bread you can eat. The main dish is soup, but it's always a very heavy vegetable soup with meat and, in season, which is the season now, heavy potatoes."

In the late afternoon, he continued, "we receive the same type of a meal, with lots of thick soup, and with the soup we always receive an extra dish of either or a different type of prepared vegetable with meat, and often it is half a can of either fish or meat."

PROBLEMS

Miller did not indicate any awareness of psychological problems among his fellow prisoners, but the interpreter from the prison camp gave one clue. Before the interview a Vietnamese official was shown some of the questions planned, not because such advance information was required but to avoid interruptions.

One question dealt with the unsuccessful raid on the empty Son Tay prison camp northwest of Hanoi in November, 1970. The interpreter suggested that Son Tay not be mentioned and added: "You can ask him if you want, but I assure you it will upset him very much. They

are all very upset about it." The interpreter did not elaborate, so it was unclear whether the pilots were distressed because the much-criticized raid was carried out or because it did not work.

The second prisoner interviewed, an Air Force captain, Edward A. Hawley of Mobile, Ala., said in a brief conversation that he was serving as a navigator aboard an F-4 when it was shot down on February 17 during a strike on the Panhandle.

The North Vietnamese apparently presented him for an interview to demonstrate the effective medical care that is available. He had been displayed with four other officers captured on February 16 and 17 at a news conference in Hanoi late in February. He was suffering from severe burns in his right arm, shoulder and neck. A photograph taken during the news conference showed his eyes



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The writer

bloodshot and a dazed expression on his battered and swollen face.

Hawley, by then a prisoner for 27 days, was vastly improved when interviewed. The lower part of his face was pink with newly healing skin, and his eyes were clear and he seemed alert, although despondent.

Although he said he had no complaints, he indicated that he found himself with time on his hands. He said that he was living alone—a factor related only to his medical condition, the interpreter explained — and that the Vietnamese had made no demands on him in terms of a regular routine.