

A Former POW's New Interrogation

By Charles Howe

There are things worse, conceded Kate Webb, than being held prisoner by the North Vietnamese for 23 days.

One can come back to the States — as she did — and promptly get mugged in Pennsylvania.

Or, again like the 29-year-old Miss Webb, one can get caught up in the latter-day Chautauqua Circuit — the world of talk shows and interviews following publication of a book.

CAPTURE

Miss Webb was the bureau manager for United Press International in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, when she was captured on April 7, 1971.

Along with five other journalists, she spent more than three weeks in the jungle, alternately being interrogated and marched before she was released.

She is one of the very few people to have been officially written off as dead and then lived to read her own obituary.

BOOK

A professional newspaper-woman to the nines, she arrived here on the last leg of a journey across the United States to talk about her book: "On The Other Side — 23 Days With The Viet Cong," published by Quadrangle Books.

A little tired and yet pleasantly edgy over her next possible assignment — a slot in the UPI's China bureau, should the government of that country allow one to open there — she talked about how it had been when she was captured.

"They stuck to the Geneva Convention rules, you know," she recalled. "But the interrogations were something else."

Along with five other media personnel, she said her captors asked the same questions over and over again.

Indeed, one interviewing her begins to get the notion he, too, was joining a long list of interrogators — either Viet Cong or what they called "communicators" in radio talk show circles.

'SCARED'

"I was scared, I suppose," she reflected in a clipped



KATE WEBB
23-day prisoner

and soft accent that was an admixture of her native New Zealand and other parts of the Far East, where she has spent most of her life.

"On one hand I was flip-pant with them — I get flip-pant when I get angry — and on the other, my knees were trembling."

Listed as dead when the fire-blackened body of a woman with a gold tooth was found near where she was last seen when she was captured, Miss Webb said she has no clear idea why she was released.

MILITARY

Possibly, she theorized, it was because she convinced her captors she was not officially connected with the military. At least 30 journalists officially listed as dead or missing in Cambodia apparently weren't able to argue as effectively as she was.

Looking at her wristwatch — another talk show beckoned — Miss Webb allowed that if her time spent with the North Vietnamese wasn't exactly first class, things got worse when she came to the States.

"A couple of fellows tried to mug me in Pittsburgh. But they were drunk and didn't do a good job of it. Bit hell out of one's finger."

Why did she get involved in the newspaper business in a combat area?

"Because it's easier for a woman to get a job there," she said.