

POWs Rely on U.S. Code of Conduct,

By SEYMOUR M. HERSH

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WASHINGTON — The American pilots imprisoned in North Vietnam have generally maintained an extremely high level of internal discipline based, to a degree far greater than previously known, on the U.S. Code of Conduct for captured officers.

This was one aspect of a broad picture of conditions inside the prison camps that emerged during interviews with some of the pilots, family members and anti-war leaders who participated in the prisoner release just concluded. The group, including three freed pilots, spent nearly two weeks together before arriving in New York last Thursday.

Other information was supplied in an interview this correspondent had with a prison-

er of war during a visit to Hanoi in March.

THE PRISONERS have set up a strong authority system, relying on rank at time of capture and length of captivity. One of the most important leaders is Navy Lt. Everett Alvarez Jr., whose low rank apparently has been overcome by the fact that he was the first American to be imprisoned. He was shot down in August 1964.

Most of the long-term prisoners — that is, those shot down between 1964 and 1968 — are being held in groups generally of 20 to 30 inside a large prison camp in Hanoi. The newer prisoners are kept in groups of three to seven in at least two other sites in the city.

The camps are externally run by the North Vietnamese, but many of the details of day-to-day life are controlled by pilot group leaders. Such things as daily exercise and educational activities are undertaken as joint activity.

Thus, one of the pilots just released served as social secretary for his group of 26, making sure that every pilot was told about his activity for the day. This camp also had a weekly "toastmasters' international" meeting at which the pilots were called upon in turn to make a speech.

MORALE WAS SAID to be high, despite the inevitable frustration and rages at the North Vietnamese captors.

"It's hard to explain," one of the freed pilots said. "What we tried to do — when you get frustrated — was to try not to vent your emotions on others."

"When you live in a large group, you get to know what bugs the other guy, and you don't do it. We derived a lot of strength from within ourselves."

One bulwark against despair is humor. A joke making the rounds in North Vietnam, according to a recently released pilot, provides the following definitions: "An optimist is a guy who says his body will be shipped home when he dies. A pessimist is a guy who says that his body will be buried here."

What is called "new guy optimism" — intended for incoming prisoners — was explained with a typical example: "See it through till '72, we'll be free in '73."

THE PILOTS reported that much of the camp conversation deals, inevitably, with sex — or the lack of it.

The interviews also made clear that communication between the various groups inside the main camp, which holds at least 250 to 300 of the prisoners, is far more extensive than previously known and includes some covert means of relaying information.

For example, one of the pilots released this month knew within a few numbers the total of prisoners now being held in the various camps. He also knew the number of men imprisoned before the renewal of bombing over North Vietnam last April. That bombing has added more than 60 prisoners.

"Being in large groups has helped us, morale-wise and spirit-wise," one of the pilots said. The shift into the larger

tion, there are periods of outdoor exercise where, apparently, there is some contact with fellow Americans.

"There's been a lot of bad treatment and a lot of good treatment," one of the recently freed pilots said. "You have to look at the whole picture." Conditions apparently vary with each camp and each command. Some are considered more "soft" than others, a pilot said.

"When you think back over it" one pilot noted, "you can remember only one or two significant things — such as anytime you move from camp to camp or anytime you get a good meal."

"Look," he went on, "there are four essential things in life — food, clothing, shelter and medical care." Since he had been in prison, he said, "they've been adequate, to say the least."

THE FOOD, in particular, he said, "improved both in quantity and in quality of preparation" during the last few years.

Each man gets one cup of hot milk a day, fresh fruit — usually bananas or oranges — and fresh bread with each meal.

The pilots released this month

Pilots Say

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IT ALSO was learned that many of the officers in the main camp refuse to make anti-war statements and will not meet with journalists or anti-war groups visiting Hanoi so as to avoid any appearance of being collaborators.

The men apparently have made a collective decision not to meet with anyone who is not a U.S. official.

"You have to realize," said one of the pilots who did choose to meet anti-war visitors, "that when you meet people up there, you're just not meeting anybody."

"A lot of people for various reasons will not meet people. These guys believe in the military system — the code of conduct — which says that you do not make public statements against your country."

THE PILOT explained that, although he personally did meet with visitors in Hanoi, he carefully avoided making any anti-war statements.

During the air war over North Vietnam in the Johnson administration, he said, the

North Vietnamese apparently forced some of the pilots to make appearances before anti-war journalists and other visitors to Hanoi. That form of coercion has stopped, he said.

The pilot added that one prisoner who refused to meet with anti-war groups and who — like many others — maintains a strong personal belief in the correctness of the Vietnam war is Lt. Cmdr. John S. McCain III, son of Adm. John S. McCain Jr., the recently retired Pacific commander in chief. McCain was shot down in October 1967 and was seriously wounded. "I saw him very recently," one of the pilots said, "and he's all right."

The closest thing to what could be called "brainwashing" comes at the beginning of each pilot's captivity, a number of sources said. All pilots are immediately placed in isolation for periods ranging from six days to months.

THE NORTH Vietnamese, however, call it a period of reflective thinking and supply the prisoners with anti-war books and piped-in broadcasts of the Hanoi Radio. In addition,

— none of whom had been in North Vietnam for more than four years — were obviously in good physical shape.

The day-to-day schedules for the prisoners depended as much on the prisoners as on their captors.

"They're very lax about getting us up," one pilot said.

"There's no disturbance by the guards or anything like that. They pretty much let us have our own routine."

THERE IS A central volleyball and basketball court in the large camp, he said, and "we share this, of course, around the whole camp."

"It all depends on the situation," he added. "When the threats of bombing are around, they prefer to keep us closer to our building and air-raid shelters."

One pilot acknowledged that the U.S. bombing attacks were occasions of great fright for at least some of the men.

Most of the day can be spent outdoors if the prisoners choose, the pilot said, although everyone must return to his room at noon for lunch and for an afternoon siesta. "We have cards and we have chess games and play acey-deucey," he said.