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The Siege of Hanoi: I



Photoreporters

The Treatment of U.S. Prisoners

By Telford Taylor

American bombing of Hanoi was resumed on the evening of Dec. 18, and the next day it was announced that captured airmen from B-52 bombers shot down over the city would be seen at a "press conference" at the International Club. The promised occasion proved to be simply an exhibition.

Dwarfing their tiny "hosts," with their long, slow stride, they looked like men from Mars. All but one bore some evidence of minor injury; the last to appear was heavily bandaged on his head. Tense and bewildered by the crush and confusion of the scene they confronted, the men stood blinking in the glare for a few seconds, gave their names and ranks, and turned away. Two of them added that they had been well treated by their captors.

Although there was nothing threatening or degrading in the way they were handled, it must have been a very straining experience for these men, and I expressed my disapproval to the Vietnamese officials who had brought me to the exhibition.

The North Vietnamese attitude toward the captured aviators is curiously ambivalent. They are constantly described in the controlled press as "war criminals" and "air pirates," but there is no effort to rouse the populace to anger against them as individuals. Press descriptions of the circumstances of capture describe the people as taking great pride in catching these fallen giants, but never suggest that any kind of personal vengeance was or should have been taken. From no source did I hear any accusation that fliers were lynched or assaulted, as sometimes happened in Germany during the last years of the Second World War.

Late in the afternoon of Dec. 21 we were suddenly told that the prisoner-of-war camp had been bombed, and we would be taken there immediately. After what had been said the day before I was expecting a long drive, and was astonished when our destination proved to be only three miles from our hotel, in the southwestern part of Hanoi near the district of Tu Liem. We had been taken there the previous afternoon to see extensive residential bomb destruction.

The camp contained two groups of

prisoners, thirteen in all, whom we met with briefly. For all I know it may have contained others whom we did not see, but one of the prisoners told us that they constituted the "zoo," by which he presumably meant a group separately held and available for showing to foreign observers. The prisoners appeared to be in good physical and psychological condition, and made no complaints during the few minutes allowed for conversation with us.

The bomb damage to the camp was unimpressive, consisting mostly of roof and wall plaster crumbled by blast. I asked one of the prisoners where they had been when the bomb exploded, and he answered that they had been under their beds. Since the camp was in a high-risk area I was surprised at this reply, and asked why they were not in shelters. They responded by denying that any were available to them, and pointed to shelters nearby which, they said, were used by the guards. On leaving, I asked the prison commandant, Captain Phong, why the prisoners had no shelters, but I received an evasive and implausible answer. Remonstrances to our official hosts for the lack of protection of the prisoners, and for misleading us with regard to the location of the camp, elicited no coherent explanation.

Two days later it was announced that several of these prisoners had been slightly injured by bomb blast, and this was confirmed to us by French journalists who visited the camp on Dec. 23. The French also reported that after our visit the prisoners had been given shovels and told to dig shelters for themselves. We were also told by Luu Quy Ky that protective measures for the prisoners were now being taken.

The total situation remains murky, for we were allowed to visit briefly with only thirteen of several hundred prisoners, and were given absolutely no information on the location or condition of the others, except so far as their circumstances may be revealed in the over six hundred letters which were given to us, for delivery here to friends and families of the prisoners. Some of them may be still in the "Hanoi Hilton" in the center of Hanoi near the railway station, or they may all have been moved elsewhere.

[A Hanoi radio broadcast in English

Dec. 21 asserted that U.S. raids had caused damage and injury to prisoners held at what it called the "Hilton Hanoi." The same broadcast said that General Taylor, Joan Baez and other Americans had visited the facility that day. However, the facility visited by General Taylor, Joan Baez and other Americans prisoners of war. Those familiar with Hanoi broadcasts could recall no other mention in recent times by Hanoi radio of the "Hanoi Hilton."]

In view of the Vietnamese policy of hedging against bomb risk by avoiding crowds and concentrations, it appears probable that the prisoners are scattered among a number of locations.

Telford Taylor, professor of law at Columbia and former chief U.S. prosecutor at the Nuremberg war crime trials, was in Hanoi during the recent bombings.