

POWs at the 'Hanoi Hilton'

The Quiet Americans

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Hanoi

Just hours before the liberation of the first American military prisoners in North Vietnam, about 200 U.S. airmen were playing ball, washing their clothes or taking a Saturday afternoon shower at the "Hanoi Hilton" here when two French correspondents arrived at the prison camp's main inner court to get their reactions to their imminent freedom.

Some of the men were naked, others bare-chested or wearing prison gray or washed-out red. But all

shied at the sight of two cameras, and, after a moment during which no one made a move, all trooped off to their cells, staring back impassively once they had put themselves behind bars.

GATES

Before passing through the two steel gates leading to the inner court, camp commander Le Quyet had told us: "Some will tell you the truth, others will tell you nonsense. You can speak to anyone you like."

We tried but got no answers to ten questions.

Turning to the shower room, we tried asking, "What are you feeling now after peace?" The showers were shut off, and the avia-

tors, turning their heads aside, hurried off to join their comrades in the cells.

Next, it was the pool hall that emptied at our approach, and then the volleyball court.

In the courtyard washing was hung out to dry on wire lines in the thin sunlight. Unarmed North Vietnamese guards, also impassive, watched us, as did armed sentinels on the watch towers.

COLONEL

Finally one prisoner, somewhat embarrassed, told us to talk to the senior officer, a colonel in cell No. 9 who had been shot down more than seven years ago.

The colonel, an Oklahoman named Robinson Risner, 48, was wearing a white turtle-neck sweater under a red POW jacket and pair of red prison pants cut down to shorts.

We asked him how he had felt when he heard about the Vietnam cease-fire agreement.

"Very glad," said Colonel Risner.

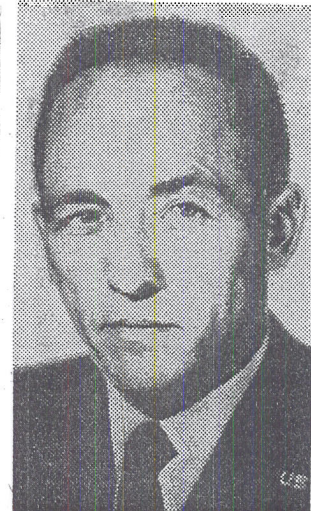
"How do you feel today?"

"We are waiting."

"Your opinions on prison conditions?"

"We must check first with our government."

The camp commander considers Colonel Risner a "hard nut," the prison interpreter said, adding that the colonel had maintained that there was no American bombing of civilian zones, even last December.



UPI Telephoto

COLONEL RISNER
A few answers

We asked Colonel Risner, "Were you afraid during the December bombings?"

"We knew the bombing was accurate," he said.

"Do you know that populated regions were hit?"

"I don't know," he said.

"Did the North Vietnamese tell you so?"

"Yes."

"Then you don't believe them?"

"Correct," the colonel said.

The "Hanoi Hilton," the city's former central jail, was transformed into a prisoner camp when the first American pilots were shot down over the north. It lies between the main railroad station and the Cuban embassy, both of which were hit during B-52 raids over Hanoi last December.