

Hanoi: POW Ate Better Than Citizen

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PARIS, Feb. 14—A North Vietnamese officer has painted a rosy picture of conditions in the camps where American prisoners of war were held.

In an interview appearing today with the Hanoi correspondent of l'Humanite, the French Communist Party newspaper, an otherwise unidentified North Vietnamese major denied that the prisoners were forced to attend political indoctrination courses.

It was the first detailed description by a North Vietnamese of conditions in the POW camps, it appears before the first prisoners to be freed have an opportunity themselves to discuss life in the camps. (After the Korean War, there were many charges and denials of ill-treatment of prisoners.)

Such were North Vietnam's efforts on behalf of the prisoners, the major said, that despite the intensive American bombing in late December the Americans were served a Christmas meal of turkey, salad and cake a alcoholic drink, and coffee and tea.

Split up in groups of 30 to 40 in requisitioned houses converted into prisons, the prisoners slept on individual beds, and received extra blankets, socks and sweaters during the winter, he said.

The North Vietnamese provided a basic and balanced 3,000 calorie daily diet and allowed prisoners to do their own cooking for the three daily meals, he said.

He said that although "their food suffered" from the effects of the war, an apparent allusion to supply problems,

the Hanoi government spent six times more money a month feeding the prisoners than an average North Vietnamese spent feeding himself.

He said that Hanoi authorities "paid no attention to rank—they were all on an equal footing for us." International practice normally dictates that military hierarchy be respected in prison camp.

The prisoners received 10 cigarettes a day, were allowed to go to Vietnamese and foreign movies once a week "except during periods of bombing," and could write home once a month and receive a monthly letter from the United States and a 6.6 pound package every three months, he said.

[At least some families of POWs have said they did not receive any mail from the prisoners and had no evidence that their mail or packages were ever received.]

The prisoners were allowed to receive "all kinds of English-language newspapers and magazines, especially American ones," the major said. Even Playboy was tolerated, "but we didn't provide this kind of magazine ourselves."

The worst punishment was 24 hours "in isolation," the major said. He insisted that there were no "dungeons" in the camps.

He said that "the prisoners' initial arrogance tended to disappear" and that they did not complain about their treatment, "understanding that we were doing what we could." He said that the political discussions were "free" and that the prisoners "could maintain and express their political opinions" although "we wanted them to know about Vietnamese reality" and or-

ganized voluntary visits to museums and farm cooperatives.

"The majority admitted in their hearts that they had been well-treated," he said, "but they feared reprisals once back in the United States and since they are professional military men they were worried about their careers and their pay."

Only those camps located in Hanoi had showers, the major said, and "they couldn't function during the bombing," but the prisoners were provided with "cisterns for their ablutions and they washed in Vietnamese fashion"—apparently meaning they took sponge baths. In addition, he said, the prisoners were regularly supplied with toothbrushes, razors, soap and toilet paper, a luxury in Vietnam). The prisoners also were furnished silverware and plates for their meals, he said.

Every camp was staffed by a doctor and an assistant and a half-dozen male nurses, the major said, adding that the prisoners "often suffered from toothaches" and were allowed to see dentists.

Seriously ill prisoners were hospitalized, he added, and there were "only a few cases of depression."

Prisoners awoke at 6 a.m., were on their own time until the midday meal at 11 a.m. and in the afternoon played table tennis, volley ball and basketball. A swimming pool and library were also at their disposal.

He added that each camp had a radio loud-speaker system hooked up either to the North Vietnamese radio or a closed-circuit program organized by the prisoners themselves on artistic and cultural subjects and "even news."