

P.O.W.'s Maintained Discipline but Had Some Quarrels

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The American prisoners of war in North Vietnam maintained strong over-all discipline and rapport, sources close to the prisoners report, but day-to-day camp life also included many serious personality disputes and some bitter divisions over the Vietnam war.

Pentagon officers, asked about this, acknowledged that divisions existed but maintained that they were not deep.

The sources said, however, that along with comradeship and group loyalty, camp life included occasional fist fights, a few near-suicides and many cliques.

In addition, it was said, much anger was directed at those

few prisoners who were described as having defied the orders of their superiors by continuing to make antiwar statements in recent years at the request of the North Vietnamese. Military officials here acknowledged that some of the senior officers who have returned from North Vietnam had expressed a desire to bring court-martial charges against at least two former prisoners.

According to the sources, there was a wide diversity of opinion about the war and how it should be ended among the pilots returning home after up to nine years in captivity. One former prisoner complained about what he termed strong psychological and military pressure to conform.

Many of the disputes were personal as well as political, this former prisoner noted, and were exacerbated by debates over such events as the ill-fated raid in 1970 on the Son Tay camp near Hanoi, which Pentagon officials incorrectly believed to be holding Americans.

Most of the pilots considered the raid a morale booster, the former prisoner said, but a few "didn't want to get shot

on the way to the helicopters."

The sources said that the tensions over the continued United States involvement in the war were felt most acutely among the more than 300 men imprisoned between 1964 and late 1968, when the Johnson Administration undertook to halt the bombing of the north in

exchange for peace negotiations in Paris.

Those men from the 1964-to-1968 group who chose to cooperate with their Vietnamese captors in recent years were considered "house radicals" by others, the sources said, and often lived in quarters with men captured more recently.

"There's a real problem," a senior American officer said

Continued on Page 10, Column 3

Continued From Page 1, Col. 8

of the returning prisoners. "They want all this to come out, but they don't want it to come out now."

"These guys have decided to clam up," he added. "They feel it is important to their comrades not to say anything that will jeopardize anybody or delay any future releases."

More than a fourth of the American prisoners in North Vietnam have been returned under terms of the Vietnam peace agreement concluded last month, with the remaining 400 scheduled to be released in three groups in the next five weeks.

Another senior Pentagon official who is familiar with the prisoner situation had a different point of view. He urged publication of an account of prisoner strife in the camps, saying that the press had to set the stage for future investigations and analyses of prisoner behavior in depth. "There were serious differences," he added.

One pilot reportedly pulled a knife on another prisoner during an argument.

A Government official acknowledged that the published descriptions of joyous plane rides from Hanoi to Clark Air Base in the Philippines were accurate but far from complete. One plane, he noted, held two prisoners, both senior officers and pilots, who were believed by their fellows to have collaborated with the enemy.

"Nobody said a word to them," the official related. "They tried to make conversation, to be buddy-buddy, but nobody said anything. They were completely ostracized."

Adding to their fellow captives' anger, the official continued, was North Vietnam's decision to permit them to return with the first group, although they had been shot down in 1967 and 1968 and, under the terms of the accord, should have been released later.

The two prisoners were listed by the North Vietnamese as being among the sick and

wounded and therefore eligible for return in the first group, the official said. Neither was in fact sick or wounded, he added, which was known to the others.

Military sources said that the charges some prisoners were planning to file against the two officers would be based not on their antiwar activity but on their refusal to stop making statements when directly ordered to do so by senior Americans in their camp.

A Pentagon official expressed the hope that "with the passage of time these guys will let bygones be bygones" and abandon the legal action.

Political Attitude Assayed

There was disagreement among the sources over the amount of political friction among the returning pilots.

One former prisoner estimated that as much as 20 per cent of the men held in the North favored the election of Senator George McGovern as offering the best chance for their early release. He added that most of the Democratic Presidential candidate's support came from among the 100 or so pilots who were shot down after the 1968 bombing halt ended in April, 1972.

His estimate was that 40 per cent of the prisoners were "hard-line" military men who became even more hawkish during captivity.

An official who spent many hours with the men after their arrival in the Philippines — a time in which dissidence was less likely to be voiced — described the estimate of prisoner support for Senator McGovern as an overstatement. He estimated that upward of 90 per cent of the men with whom he came in contact supported President Nixon's policies.

The pilots indicated, the official added, that of all the antiwar figures who visited Hanoi, they were most furious with former Attorney General Ramsey Clark. "They really got ticked off about him," the official said, apparently because they felt Mr. Clark had reversed his public position on the war. He was serving in the Johnson Cabinet at the time that many of the returning prisoners were shot down.

The pilots' anger at those men who collaborated — in their view — with Hanoi stemmed from hatred of the North Vietnamese as well as anger over the refusal to obey orders.

From 1965 on, one source said, the prisoners began organizing themselves along military lines and eventually set up an elaborate command-and-control system. "It embraced everyone," he said.

The senior officer of one

camp, Col. John P. Flynn of the Air Force, from Shalimar, Fla., was eligible to be with the first group, another source said, but chose to stay and oversee the return.

During the early years of captivity, it was said, conditions in the camps were harsh, with isolation and poor food commonplace. Many pilots were subjected to brutal interrogation and forced to sign antiwar statements or make antiwar addresses over the Hanoi radio.

Some of those who later became widely admired hard-liners, such as Col. Robinson Risner, a jet ace, and Lieut. Comdr. John S. McCain 3d, son of a retired admiral who had headed the Pacific fleet — made such antiwar statements.

Details of mistreatment could not be learned, although military officials have said they

will discuss such incidents after all of the prisoners are back.

One prisoner released in 1968 by the North Vietnamese told of being strung up shortly after getting to prison, a former Pentagon official said in an interview. The source explained that the pilot, who was described as young and brash, refused to answer questions, so his hands and feet were bound, the rope was thrown over a rafter and he was suspended for about two hours, after which he apparently told the North Vietnamese all they wanted to know.

"The more Western-oriented and arrogant a pilot is, the more he is going to get it," the former official said, adding:

"The point is that this pilot doesn't want to talk about it. He wouldn't talk about it at all during the first debriefings. Implicit is this question he thinks will be asked: 'Why did they stop torturing him?' with the answer being, 'He talked.' In fact he did talk, and was ashamed of it."

In October, 1969, the North Vietnamese suddenly changed policy — "as if from day to night," one official remarked — and conditions were dramatically eased. A former prisoner told of suddenly being allowed to see others and being provided with better food, including daily cups of fruit juices and milk.

More Exercise Allowed

The men were allowed to live in groups as large as 26 and had more opportunity for exercise and recreation.

The senior officers immediately took on responsibility for maintaining discipline and morale, military sources said. Committees were set up and many activities were organized.

but Were Split on the War and Had Personal Quarrels

The men held debates, played a variety of games and began a number of education projects. Many books — most of them antiwar — were made available.

One returned prisoner told of recently reading "Fire in the Lake" by Frances Fitzgerald, a best-selling study of the Vietnamese people published last year.

The returning prisoners generally believe, a Government official said, that the Nixon Administration's decision early in 1969 to begin denouncing the treatment of American prisoners in North Vietnam — which led to international concern over their condition — was directly responsible for Hanoi's sudden decision to improve conditions.

The official added that he and others believed that the dramatic change "vindicates" the much-criticized decision to make a worldwide plea for more humane treatment. Millions of letters demanding improved conditions were mailed to North Vietnam.

Interviewers Ruled Out

Shortly after the liberalization, the official noted, the prisoners decided to forbid any interviews or meetings with journalists or other visitors to North Vietnam. Between 1965 and 1969 more than 70 prisoners were seen or interviewed by antiwar delegations or newsmen.

From that point on no more than seven prisoners from the 1964-to-1968 group were seen or interviewed by outsiders, and only two with any regularity. Some pilots who did meet with journalists and others were put with younger pilots after the renewed bombing of the North, with its resulting influx of prisoners.

The prisoners' individual attitudes toward criticism of the war reflect the national attitude when they were shot down.

A man who was downed at the height of the protests against the Johnson Administration's policies complained about what he termed "mental torture" stemming from the desire of the older men to maintain unity and insure conformity. He pro-

vided no specific details but asserted that after the liberalization by Hanoi in the fall of 1969, he suffered "much more mental anguish from Americans than from North Vietnamese."

This prisoner added that before the liberalization he shared a cell with two men, one of whom he hated and with whom he constantly argued. He said he was reassured to learn after getting into a larger group

that it was torn by a long-standing argument between a young officer and a senior one.

An official closely involved with the returning prisoners said that many credited the Son Tay raid with forcing the North Vietnamese to shift all the prisoners to a centrally located camp in Hanoi, improving the opportunities for American-imposed discipline and communication.