

POWs Begin Telling It Like It Was

By Larry D. Hatfield

Examiner News Staff

TRAVIS AIR BASE — A compellingly dramatic picture of life inside Communist prisoner of war camps, including reports of intense friction among American POWs over the war and collaboration, is beginning to emerge.

The revelations come from returned American prisoners and from military sources who have dealt with them. They include details of an elaborate and highly efficient command-communications-intelligence network among prison camps, diets featuring (at times) monkey meat, and a new, abridged version of the Bible composed from memory.

They also reflect that despite differences among prisoners, which occasionally broke into fist fights, the general level of discipline and morale was strikingly high and a decidedly far cry from what former POWs described as the "cover your —" atmosphere of American POW camps during the Korean War.

Some 163 military and civilian POWs have returned to the U.S. in the first phase of the repatriation and, by common consent, they have refused to discuss prison life in anything more than gen-

eral terms until all POWs are home.

They are also under Pentagon orders not to discuss certain phases of their prison experience. For the protection of prisoners not yet

Former POW Weds
—Story, Page 3

released, the Pentagon prefers they confine their comments primarily to how they feel about being home, what changes they note and that sort of thing.

Nevertheless, through some POW statements and private discussions with escort officers and others who have come into contact with the POWs, an intriguing picture of prison life is emerging.

POW spokesmen have all mentioned the high level of prisoner discipline inside the camps, citing almost invariably the "faith" they kept in each other and in their country.

This was materially augmented by a formal command structure set up in 1965. A commander-in-chief of the "Allied POW Wing" was named, and a

—Turn to Page 4, Col. 1

From Page 1

full chain of command was set up.

The identity of the wing commander and his top aides, who are still in North Vietnam, is a closely guarded secret to protect them from possible Communist retaliation.

Prior to 1970, this command structure was maintained, military sources say, by an ingenious communications network which allowed the central command to pass on orders and information to camp commanders at other camps. Disciplinary and medical transfers, often deliberately invited by the POWs, kept the prison grapevine functioning.

'Hanoi Hilton'

This task, officials say, became decidedly easier in 1970 when the North Vietnamese moved most of the American prisoners into the "Hanoi Hilton" following the abortive freedom raid on the Son Tay prison camp. The "Hilton" is a former French colonial jail.

Although returning POWs say the chain of command maintained discipline, military sources admit that it sometimes broke down. Primary cause of the friction appeared to be splits over American involvement in the war.

An interesting pattern seems to emerge here. The oldest — those captured before 1968 — and the newest — those shot down since last spring's re-escalation — were often the most critical of the U.S.

Some so-called "hard-line" POWs reportedly now want to file charges against other prisoners who allegedly "collaborated" with the enemy, making propaganda broadcasts and giving information to interrogators.

Question of Charges

The Pentagon refuses to deny or confirm such reports. It has consistently denied that it intends to bring charges as a result of propaganda broadcasts. A high Pentagon official told *The Examiner* earlier this month, however, that charges of varying degrees had been considered against as many as two dozen returnees.

There is intense debate among POWs, military sources said, about the degree of collaboration. "There obviously are some cases where statements were made under extreme duress," a Pentagon official said, citing charges of brutality and mental torture, particularly during the early stages of the war.



A. F. COL. RISNER

Can't talk now

One man who made a statement on Radio Hanoi told reporters last week he would like to talk about the issue but couldn't. Air Force Col. Robinson Risner, a World War II pilot and Korean War ace, was asked about anti-war broadcasts and other statements critical of the U.S. government he made over Radio Hanoi and whether he was "pressured" to make them.

"I wish I could talk to you," he said before being

whisked away by a Pentagon escort.

Some POWs, however, feel that some statements were made without sufficient pressure. The *New York Times* reported Friday that two high-ranking pilots aboard one of the first flights to return to the U.S. were "ostracized" because of their alleged cooperation with the North Vietnamese.

The *Times* also reported that debates over the war occasionally were so intense that at one point, one POW pulled a knife on another.

Life in the prison camps was considerably harder in the early stages of the war before President Nixon and various POW-MIA groups made the fate of the POWs a major issue in the war debate.

Early captives were treated harshly, initial debriefings indicate, and diets consisted primarily of rice, occasional bits of chicken fat, fish heads, and, as one POW at Travis put it last week, "too damned much cooked cabbage."

Food Improved

Since 1969, the food, while unappetizing by American standards, improved. Chicken appeared more often. Occasionally dog or monkey meat was added to the diet (these last two being more of a staple of the Viet Cong than of the North Vietnamese). Fruit juices and milk also were made available fairly regularly from 1969 on.

Some vegetable gardens were allowed but didn't produce enough to substantially improve the prison fare.

A broad academic program was set up in most camps — particularly at the Hanoi Hilton after it became the main camp — with courses ranging from foreign languages to electronics.

Prisoner-organized athletics, calisthenics and religious services also were regular features of the camps. An abridged version of the Bible, written by some of the prisoners from memory, was used regularly in inter-faith religious services.

A written history of the Hilton also was kept, one source said.

News from the outside was confined at first largely to Radio Hanoi and posters the Communists put up in the camps. As could be expected, they were uniformly critical of the United States.

Later, however, new prisoners became a valued source of information. First Lt. William Y. Arcuri, 25, for instance, who was shot down just before Christmas, became sort of the Walter Cronkite of the Hanoi Hilton.

He says he was able to talk with about 150 POWs, most of them long-termers, after his capture. "When they were allowed outside (their cells), they would come over to our little cell and talk to us," the B-52 bomber co-pilot said.

Among other things, they were surprised that Sen. George McGovern lost to President Nixon "by such a big margin." A mock election was held by the POWs and, also as expected, Nixon won by an overwhelming margin.

Arcuri, of Yuba City, said the POWs were "interested in everything that was going on back in the states. They wanted to know about sports, fashions, typical things, like shorter skirts on women and pants suits."

Not every POW got the word, however. Warrant Officer James H. Hestand, 23,



LT. W. Y. ARCURI

Hanoi Hilton newsman

of Oklahoma City, did not find out until last week that President Lyndon B. Johnson died last month.

Hestand's mother gave him that news at Brooke General Hospital in San Antonio where, ironically, the young airman was occupying the hospital suite in which Johnson had been treated.

Maj. Norman A. McDaniel, 35, imprisoned for seven years, said one of the things

that sustained him and others was a sense of humor.

"You had to have it in order to survive," he said. "One thing that was quite popular were jokes about 'the light at the end of the tunnel.' We looked at that light a long, long time."

Toward the end, more books were allowed into the camp. They generally were anti-war tomes, some by American writers but most primarily by French and other writers.

None of the POWs or any other military sources would talk about escape attempts from North Vietnam. Col. Thomas Byrne of the Pentagon's "Project Homecoming" office said, "I can't touch that subject with a 10-foot pole."

The reason, obviously, is to protect POWs not yet released. During the war, the spokesman said, 24 Americans escaped from the Viet Cong (23 were released for various reasons), two escaped from the Pathet Lao, three were "recovered while being held by the Viet Cong" and none, apparently, escaped from the North Viet-



DOUGLAS RAMSEY

Kept on the move

namese.

Although conditions (which often included long periods of solitary) were bad in the North, they tended to be relatively mild compared to the treatment of POWs held by the Viet Cong in South Vietnam.

Intelligence officers debriefing the few men returned so far from the South are hearing horror tales of "cages," leg irons, diets of monkey and dog meat, disease and forced marches.

Dodging allied troops and

B-52s, plus tenuous supply lines, forced the Viet Cong to keep their prisoners on the run, most times on foot, occasionally on bicycles and infrequently on trucks.

They ate what the Viet Cong ate, which in many cases was, as one official put it, "almost nothing."

The only prisoner so far released by the Viet Cong from South Vietnam has shed much light on conditions there. He is Douglas Ramsey, 38, a State Department civilian working on village recovery programs when captured.

Ramsey was among the returnees last week, still suffering from malaria (the most common affliction of POWs who were treated for that, but had to handle lesser medical problems, like dental problems, themselves). He was, however, in "good" condition.

Ramsey said the Viet Cong constantly kept him on the move.

"At first," Ramsey said, "all the moves were on foot, but later the VC got so brave they'd drive down a highway at night in diesel trucks."

Many prisoners in the South ultimately were moved at night by truck, military sources said, in areas that were considered "safe havens."

Ramsey said he could tell by the intensity of firepower in his captive area when the Viet Cong likely would move him again, adding that he would have his gear packed and ready to go whenever they told him.

According to some returnee's reports, they were gagged at times to prevent them from calling out to American or ARVN troops who were so close that their conversations could be overheard.

In any event, the returnees so far from South Vietnam are uniformly more haggard and beaten-looking than those from the North.

There was a reason for it, the returnees said.

As one escort commented after flying the 8010 miles from the Philippines to Travis with one of the VC-released POWs: "From what he told me, the North Vietnamese invented Hell, the Viet Cong refined it."