

How POWs Stayed Sane

By Dorothy Townsend
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"Telling" movies was the main form of entertainment in the Hanoi prisoner of war camp of one ex-POW. He said some men were so good that he would even go to "reruns" of their movies.

Old movies were described in such detail that a film that took three hours to run in a theater might take five hours to "tell," according to Captain John H. (Spike) Nasmyth Jr.

a horn sound at 6 o'clock—about ten guys would meet down in the corner of the room for a Spanish class.

"Others would meet in another corner for a biology class. The floor was like black cement and we'd use it for a blackboard."

Broken pieces of red tile from the roof "made good chalk," he said.

"You can make ink from a number of things, ground up cigarette ashes for one thing. Some guys would take this and paper supplies for the toilet and make dictionaries—French, Spanish,

"One guy was really good at it," Nasmyth said, recalling the tedium of day-to-day life in a POW camp. "He told 'Tom Jones' better than the movie."

The men did the same with books they had read and with their own biographies, he said.

TIME

"The main thing we did was try and conjure up things to kill time. You wouldn't believe some of the things."

Nasmyth, back home in suburban South San Gabriel, pending separation from the Air Force at the end of an official period of convalescent leave, sipped beer from a can and talked freely

about living arrangements, food, medical attention, diversions and the uncertainty of life in the POW camp.

By mutual agreement, none of the men released by the North Vietnamese will discuss aspects of their prison life they feel could endanger other men still held.

"By 1970-71, the majority of us were in the large camps in large rooms, 35 to

40 people to the room," he said. "Before that we were in the same camps, smaller rooms.

"This was home — living room, dining room, bedroom, everything." The room also served as classroom and exercise room, with "99 per cent of the exercise taken inside," according to Nasmyth.

SCHEDULE

"To keep from going buggy," he said, "we had a little schedule. At the 6 o'clock beep—the city of Hanoi has

Russian, what have you.

"Then they would pass around the dictionaries. After some years, there would be guys teaching French who had never taken French in their lives. Like me, I was teaching Spanish the last year.

"We learned it all from the other guys."

CLASS

Nasmyth and another prisoner also taught a psychology class that was "very popular for awhile." Both had minored in the subject in college.

"We started receiving packages (from home) in 1969 and 1970," he said, "but we never received the books in them. Apparently the North Vietnamese held them out. Then, three or four months ago they gave us the books."

The food was not gourmet fare but "it seemed to keep us going," Nasmyth said.

"Every once in awhile a rock that looked just a grain of rice would pop up and break a tooth. For the first year all I had was rice — no bread — a bowl of soup and a side dish."

He said there were times in the first two years of his imprisonment when he "could have eaten more." In that period he steadily dropped in weight from the 170 pounds he weighed when his F-4C Phantom aircraft was shot down on Sept. 4 1966. His present weight is 155 which he says is "about

right" for his build.

The prison menu consisted of an invariable three dishes: rice, soup and a side dish.

"There was a boiled edible green we called grass soup and didn't particularly like. There were several kinds of greens, some we called kerosene greens because that's what the soup tasted like, swamp greens and grass greens.

WOUND

"Then from about May to September we had pumpkin soup not at every meal but very frequently. Then from Christmas time it was cabbage soup time."

At March Air Force where Nasmyth spent a little more than a week after his February 20 return to Southern California, he underwent surgery for the removal of pieces of shrapnel in an arm and a leg, and he still has the stitches in the leg wound.

BOMBING

However, he did not knock the medical attention he received in North Vietnam.

"They tried," he said. Nasmyth called the medical care given prisoners "adequate in relation to their capability."

Nasmyth said U.S. bombing of Hanoi was "quite ex-

citing when they were close." He called the raids "a great morale builder."

He said the men heard "blurbs" about what was going on in the U.S. on the Voice of Vietnam broadcasts which came over speakers in the rooms. The word about the U.S. was "usually negative," he said.

The men learned about racial strife, anti-war demonstrations and the assassinations of Senator Robert Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King on the broadcasts.

The worst thing about prison life was the "horrible uncertainty of release," Nasmyth said.



UPI Telephoto

POW Banner

Air Force Lieutenant Colonel John A. Dramesi displayed a prison-made U.S. flag from the bus he boarded after arriving at Clark Air Base in the Philippines from Hanoi yesterday. He said he made the blue from a jacket and the red stripes from a pair of women's panties he had mys-

teriously received in the mail. Using a needle made from a piece of copper, he hand-embroidered the white stars with thread from a towel. He said he and his fellow prisoners saluted the flag every night. Dramesi, 40, from Philadelphia, had been a prisoner since April 2, 1967.