

## P.O.W.S

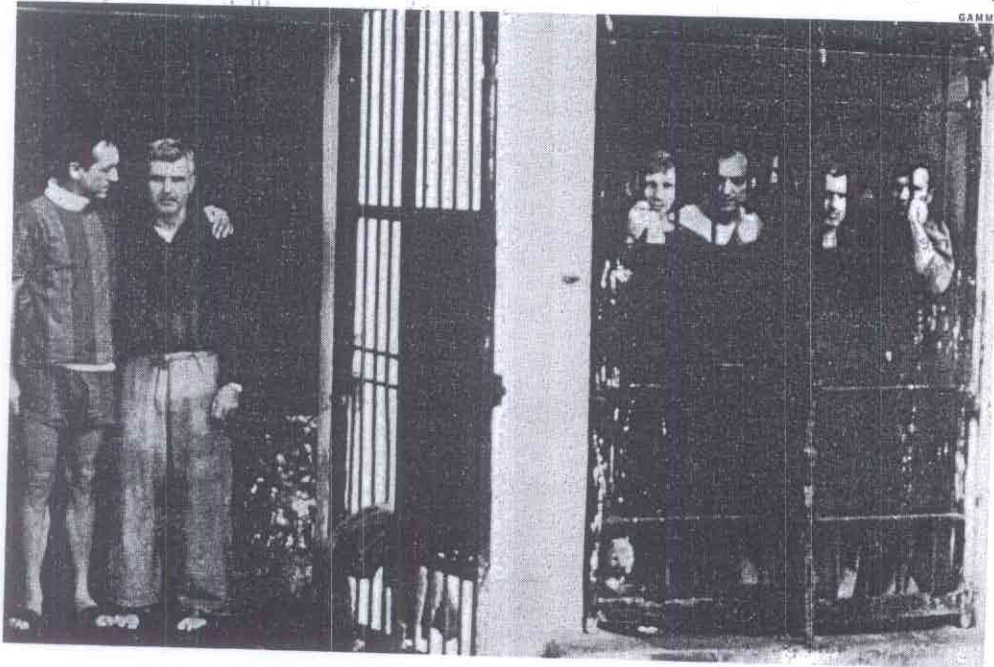
## And Now a Darker Story

The first American prisoners to return from Hanoi presented an almost unvarying impression of good health, tight discipline and bell-ringing patriotism. Such was the uniformity of the prisoners' remarks, in fact, that some skeptics even wondered whether they had been scripted, or at least suggested, by U.S. officials.

The prisoners themselves convincingly refuted such speculation. Said Navy Captain Howard E. Rutledge: "I am surprised anyone could conceive that we could come out of there and say anything but 'God bless America.'" Added Lieut. Commander Everett Alvarez Jr.: "For years and years we've

Hersh's story, further accounts of alleged mistreatment and torture emerged, often from U.S. Government officials. It is still unclear how widespread mistreatment was. The health and high spirits of the prisoners themselves seem to suggest relatively humane treatment. Yet official sources say that before October 1969, when conditions improved, psychological and physical torture often occurred. Prisoners were hung upside down from beams until they were ready to talk, made to stand for hours without being allowed to move, and forced to crawl through latrines filled with human excrement. They were beaten with clubs and rifle butts.

Most prisoners held in the South by the Viet Cong suffered an even worse fate. Chained in separate cages, they



AMERICAN PRISONERS IN THE HANOI HILTON CAMP SHORTLY BEFORE RELEASE  
"We've dreamed of this day, and we kept the faith."

dreamed of this day, and we kept the faith—faith in God, in our President and in our country."

The outpouring of emotion readily reflected the end of years of hardships that are only beginning to be known, and a patriotism that survived those hardships. Prisoners who had doubts about the war or gave statements to protest groups or were thought to have collaborated with the enemy were harshly judged by the other prisoners.

The very first plane that landed at Clark Air Base, it turned out, carried two American prisoners whom fellow P.O.W.s hope to bring to trial. Correspondent Seymour Hersh reported in the *New York Times* that the men had been condemned by other prisoners for making antiwar statements in spite of orders to the contrary. U.S. officials confirmed Hersh's report but stressed that they hoped the charges would be dropped.

Following the appearance of

were kept in total isolation. Unable to communicate or even move, they would watch numbly as the guards shoveled ants and other insects into their cages.

A tightly knit organization was impossible in the South, but in the North discipline was the key to survival. Notes were passed in the latrine, exercise and prayers were kept up, and a camp chronicler was even appointed to record the history of the captivity. By late 1969 such discipline had carried the prisoners through the worst.

The story of how the American P.O.W.s in Viet Nam survived so well, according to one U.S. official, "is something soul-stirring, something awesome." It will likely be told in full once all the P.O.W.s are back home. Says Army Captain Mark A. Smith, 26, who had no fewer than 38 wounds when captured by the Viet Cong in April 1972: "The American people do not know what goes on in a place like that, and it will be a shock to many of them."