

# An Inside Look at

By Horst Faas

## Fortress-Like Prison Empty of Americans

HANOI — (AP) — Pieces of dirty prison clothes, a pile of well-read books, some graffiti and memories were all that was left yesterday of American war prisoners at the Hanoi Hilton.

When 33 Americans were taken out of the thick-walled, fortress-like old French prison compound in downtown Hanoi Friday morning to be released, all the cells were empty for the first time since the air war against North Vietnam began more than eight years ago.

Yesterday prison guards swept the whitewashed cell blocks. In each, 15 to 30 American POWs had slept on elevated concrete blocks, covered with wooden boards and rattan mats, locked behind steel-barred doors.

Other guards tended grapevines and some rose bushes in the courtyard between the prison gate and the drab prisoners' compound.

The camp commander, a North Vietnamese army captain named Truong Son, smiling, chain smoking, dressed in an immaculate uniform and cap, gave a guided tour of the Hanoi Hilton.

The English of his interpreters left no doubt where they had served in the past few years. The Hanoi Hilton may be the only place in Hanoi where English is spoken with an unmistakably American accent.

The prison was built more than 40 years ago by the French, who used to lock up their political prisoners in small solitary cells within the square compound that is sealed from a pleasant, quiet downtown Hanoi residential area by towering gray, two-foot thick walls topped by broken glass, barbed wire and watchtowers.

"When we decided to use we worked hard to improve it," Capt. Son continued. "We broke down many walls to make much bigger cells. We had no solitary for the Americans here. We also built many water pipes so that they could wash every day.

### Volley Ball Court

"We flattened the courtyard so that our prisoners could play volley ball and basketball and we built them a club to play bridge,

Ping Pong and chess. When we learned about American habits and customs we built a fireplace and a barbeque pit — so that our prisoners could prepare their food the American way," he added.

"When it was hot during the summer months we gave them an electric fan for each cell. Then we organized a broadcast system with two or three loudspeakers in each room. In the day time the prisoners could stay in the courtyard and do what they liked, only at night, of course, we had to lock them up."

### Say No Complaints

The camp commander and his military interpreters beamed like efficient public relations men as they continued to recite numerous other amenities of the Hilton.

"Of course, each prisoner could complain and every day the prisoners had a chance to contact a North Vietnamese officer, but we never received one complaint. I think they realized that they got fair treatment," said the camp commander.

Only the prisoners can finally tell what really happened at the Hanoi Hilton, what it was really like.

But walking through the vaulted corridor with its heavy steel door with huge old locks and into the cell block courtyard where prisoners' footsteps have stomped the ground so hard that no grass grows from it any more, one can sense a war prisoner's first desperate feeling of what to expect there — boredom, the endless wait, the violent clashes between men who succumb to violence against each other to forget their own frustrations.

### Mosquito Nets

The cell blocks flanking the courtyard look like solid barns, whitewashed inside and out, with big black painted steel doors and steel barred openings just under the 18-foot-high roof.

Above the two rows of concrete blocks which served as bedsteads for the prisoners, wires are strung for mosquito nets to be attached. A single bare bulb lights the large room that could accommodate up to 35 prison-

# Hanoi Hilton

## for First Time

ers sleeping on mats 19 inches apart.

There are no decorations whatsoever.

A prison guard explains the reason for a blackboard at the end of the cell: "That is for the Americans that were willing to learn.

The loudspeakers attached high in the corners of the room were silent yesterday.

Several stacks of new and freshly laundered prison clothes are explained by a prison official. "We are always ready for all eventualities."

### Reading Room

In the center of the courtyard there is wooden thatched roof shack that served as a reading room. Two small cubicles were reserved for opening mail from home.

A round pavilion with two large open pits was the prisoners' kitchen. There is the inevitable basketball court and the table tennis table.

A small wooden hut was the dispensary where, according to the camp commander, prisoners could get all medicines needed to cure minor ailments.

Vietnamese guards and officers are reluctant to talk about their impressions of the American prisoners with whom they lived within the Hilton's walls for many years.

### 'Right Opinion'

"Most could not understand Vietnamese people, our history, our attitude, when they got here. Some of them tried to understand us, others didn't. Maybe some left with the right opinion. We had no time to learn about their customs and American habits —we were only concerned with giving them fair treatment," one prison guard officer said.

But a political army cadre remembers other incidents: "Often American prisoners would fight violently among each other —because of different opinions, tastes, insults. We had to intervene to stop it. Maybe it was over politics, maybe just some personal problem.

"A lieutenant junior grade attacked another so that the man came to us to ask for protection. Some Americans just liked to fight. But we never had a prison riot."

This army man first gave the names and ranks of several American prisoners in-

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involved in alleged violent clashes of opinion and beatings, but then asked reporters not to identify the men.

"Maybe it is not good for them," he said.

On a table in the open air reading room, some books, dog-eared magazines and prisoners' manuscripts are left behind.

"They had much more reading material, but they

took a lot with them to read on the long flight home," a guard said.

There is an odd array of book titles: "Murder for Profit," "Peanuts," "Candidate and Optimism," "Hitchcock's Mystery Masterpieces," and "Andy Capp's Best" lie beside a well-used guide to shorthand and "The Imitation of Christ."