

Lessons From Korea: The POWs' Lonely War of Adjustment

by Michael Kernan

"That TV show of the men coming back from Vietnam—it brought tears to my eyes," said Elton N. McDowell, "and I don't think I've really shed tears three times in my whole life."

McDowell, of Baltimore, was himself a prisoner in the Korean War. As a man who must know what an ex-POW has to face even years after his sufferings, he and other Korean returnees had been asked to advise Vietnam POWs on what the future may be like for them.

He couldn't give any advice. None of them could.

"I can't say what their experience will be," he muttered. "I just don't know."

Quiet, steady and unflappable, McDowell was a prisoner only 42 days and was not exposed to indoctrination, but he had the basic POW experience: the all-night marches (he never did get to a permanent camp), the lice, the diet of rice and soybeans (once, some soup with a dog's jawbone in it), the fear and, upon his return, the sudden fame. First listed as dead, then missing and finally as a POW, McDowell had his share of publicity.

"There wasn't much fuss, though," said the West Virginia native, "I was a country boy, had my name in the papers and that was about it."

After three weeks of celebrating and an abortive job near home, he settled down to nine years in a Veterans Administration hospital followed by 10 years as a nursing assistant in the VA's Loch Raven hospital at Baltimore, where he lives with his wife and three children in a neat home financed by a GI loan.

"It's all a matter of adjustment," he said. "I don't let things bother me. They say I'll never get an ulcer."

McDowell makes it sound easy. Yet the fact that even he could give no advice to Vietnam veterans reveals something about the very private nature of the POW experience and its influence even years later.

See KOREA, B6, Col. 1

KOREA, From B1

Several Korea POWs pointed out that: "The two wars were radically different as to duration, techniques and public response; so far, the public doesn't know is indoctrination was attempted in Vietnam; the return home by jet is much faster than it was by ship in 1953, meaning a greater shock of adjustment and tremendous publicity, which is a problem in itself.

But POWs aren't the only ones who shy at drawing parallels between the two wars.

"I don't know if the government brought in any Korea POWs to help with the repatriation this time," said Dr. Henry A. Segal. "I offered my services but was turned down."

Dr. Segal was chief psychiatrist at the psychiatric center in Tokyo during the Korean War. An Army major at the time, he was in charge of all the psychiatric processing teams handling the 3,629 prisoners returned in Operation Big Switch. He also accompanied the 149 sick and wounded returnees of Operation Little Switch back to Valley Forge Hospital in Pennsylvania. A practicing psychiatrist in Washington today, he would seem to have been a natural choice for technical advisor in the present situation.

One reason he was passed over, he speculated, was that he favored a far more leisurely return than authorities wanted. He felt that repatriation should be delayed or at least done in stages ("some of the POW wives agreed with me on that").

Korean returnees had the long Pacific voyage to help their adjustment and Segal assigned teams of psychiatrists, psychologists, psychiatric social workers and technicians to accompany the soldiers. There was a good deal of group therapy on board ship along with debriefing sessions.

"Not only is it difficult to compare POWs of different wars," said Segal, "but you have to decide what is unique to the war prisoner situation that separates it from the whole problem of return. Anybody coming back home from, say, a stretch in prison or two years' study in Europe will have some stress. After all, you're picking up a set of relationships

that are still back there where you were when you left."

Returning people have fantasies about their families and the families build up fantasies too. Then you come back and find that neither of you is the same person."

Dr. Segal deplored the lack of follow-up information about Korea prisoners. The Army does not keep track of discharged soldiers and civilian studies are hard to find. One of the most startling of those is a mortality investigation done on World War II and Korean War prisoners by M. Dean Nefzger of Johns Hopkins University.

Korean prisoners are 40 per cent more likely to die

at any given time since their release than the average white American male, according to the report. Fully half of the younger Korea POWs who have died since the war died violently by murder, suicide or accident.

Futurist Alvin Toffler, adding his own comment on this report, recently observed: "These figures suggest an underlying problem of widespread alcoholism, since high rates of accident, suicide and murder frequently link up with high alcoholism rates."

Noting that the deaths from disease among his subjects ran exceptionally low, Nefzger suggested yet another factor that must be considered in any study of POWs: "Could it be that medical screening for military service selects men more likely to incur accidents at the same time as it selects men less prone to disease?"

"Is it the training for combat or the exposure to the dangers of combat that leads to more traumatic deaths?"

Then there is the business of the indoctrination attempts by both the North Koreans and the Chinese. Dr. Segal and others violently reject the word "brainwashing," which implies some mysterious, supernatural process, the very fear of which can increase the susceptibility of a prisoner. One authority speculates that the American public was so shocked by GI defections that it assumed they must be caused by some kind of magic; hence the embracing of the dis-

turbing term "brainwashing." Actually, collaboration and the attempt to encourage it are as old as war.

Eugene Kinkead, in his book, "In Every War but One," quoted an assistant Secretary of the Army to the effect that one man in every seven was guilty of serious collaboration — "writing disloyal tracts, say, or agreeing to spy or organize for the Communists after the war." Less serious collaboration might go as high as 30 per cent, he added.

The view has been disputed in "March to Calumny" by Albert D. Biderman, who accused Kinkead and the Army of exaggerating the rate for their own purposes. He noted that court-martial was considered warranted for only 82 soldiers, that only 14 were ever tried and of those 11 convicted.

In any case, the reports of collaboration led to a special code of conduct for soldiers and training courses in resisting indoctrination. We do not yet know how much that training helped the Vietnam prisoners. Nor do we know how much the indoctrination, or the individual psychic defenses against it, or the fear of it, has become a permanent fact of life for Korea returnees.

"The average new repatriate was dazed, lacked spontaneity, spoke in dull monotones, had markedly diminished affectations (zombie reaction)," reported Dr.

Robert J. Lifton of Yale, who accompanied returnees on shipboard in 1953. "At the same time he was tense, restless, clearly suspicious . . . had difficulty dealing with his feelings. . . ."

"His guilt was marked in relation to all phases of his experience—capture, surviving when friends did not, primitive behavior and cooperation, no matter how inconsequential, with the enemy . . . He was defensive in discussing prison camp behavior . . . although relieved to be back in American hands he was in no hurry to get home."

Though the soldiers became more belligerent and irritable (that is, emotionally responsive) at sea, they reverted to the bland, emotionless pose when they met their families at San Francisco, he said.

"In group therapy . . . they all reflected the tremendous feelings of isolation, inability to communicate and anxiety about the future . . . They recognized their difficulties in relating to outsiders and experienced fear in anticipating relations with family and friends . . . They perceived the homecoming as particularly threatening."

Segal's findings were similar:

"Initial picture was labeled zombie reaction . . . There was little spontaneous talk of home, family or future . . . or was highly unrealistic . . . They appeared suspended in time, confused by new status and incapable of forming decisions about the future . . . Feared nonacceptance . . . over possibility that they had been successfully indoctrinated by enemy . . . They continued to behave as if still in Communist prison camps."

The chief difficulties that Segal foresaw in the homecoming were the hero-for-a-week problem, the problem of communication, the return to an uninterested or hostile home environment, and curiosity seekers.

For comparison, check this list of traits anticipated in hospitalized Vietnam ex-POWs by Dr. Cecil P. Peck, VA psychology chief:

- Rejection of authoritarian figures and institutions; alienation from his own feelings and from other persons.
- Lack of vocational or social goals.
- Refusal to identify with persons working in the Establishment.
- Shaky personal identity.
- Diffuse paranoia which involves dimensions of suspicion, honesty, trust and "uptightness."
- Anger which is frequently intense.
- Latent suicidal tendencies which are related to guilt.
- Doubt about one's ability to love other persons.

How long such symptoms will last and how much they will affect a man's future depend, of course, on the individual.

In the meantime, this was Dr. Segal's advice to the families of returning POWs:

"Be patient. Don't expect anything at the outset. Give each other space."