

Tamil

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THE NATION

P.O.W.S

At Last the Story Can Be Told

FOR weeks the returned P.O.W.s had been stepping from "freedom birds" onto the television screens—most of them saluting crisply, walking smartly, looking physically fit and acting mentally alert. As the nation's early apprehensions faded, a new idea set in: perhaps the P.O.W.s had been humanely treated after all. That illusion was shattered last week. With all the known surviving prisoners safely home from Viet Nam, the dam of restraints broke, and tales of mistreatment and torture poured forth. Navy Commander Richard Stratton, best known for his deep bows and seemingly drugged appearance in a 1967 news conference, summed up the reports of many prisoners when he said: "I have been tortured, I have been beaten, I have been placed in solitary confinement, I have been harassed, I have been humiliated." Navy Lieut. Commander Rodney Knutson struck the same harsh note. "Lenient and humane treatment?" he asked. "Not on your life!"

Prisoners detailed a mosaic of torture ranging from the brutally physical to the ingeniously psychological. They conceded that treatment had varied for each P.O.W., that conditions had improved remarkably by the fall of 1969, and that high-ranking officers had absorbed the worst of it. But mistreatment was clearly widespread, and often brought on by the prisoners' steadfast resistance. As Navy Captain Jeremiah Denton said, "We forced them to be brutal to us." Even those who considered their treatment comparatively mild, such as Air Force Captain Joseph Milligan, often suffered enormously. Provided totally inadequate medical attention, Milligan treated—and cured—a badly burned arm by letting maggots eat away the pus, then cleaning off the maggots with his own urine.

The favorite props of the North Vietnamese captors were lengths of rope, iron manacles that could be screwed down to the bone and fan belts for administering beatings. Prisoners claimed that they were tied up for interminable periods into positions that yogis could not assume. Ropes tied to a man's ankles, wrists and neck were tightened until he was bent over backward in a doughnut shape. Men were also bent forward into a position of a baby sucking its big toe. The ropes cut off circulation, and in several cases paralyzed limbs for months, even years.

Raw Flesh. Handcuffs on the wrists of one prisoner were tightened so much that blood came through the pores. Hands and feet often swelled to unimaginable proportions and turned black. Jaws, noses, ribs, teeth and limbs, the prisoners charged, were deliberately broken and left unset. The sick and wounded were left in their own excrement for days on end. Fan belts or

lengths of rubber turned buttocks of beaten prisoners into raw flesh. Sergeant Don MacPhail said that he was hung from a tree over three fresh graves and beaten with sticks. He was told that he would be in the fourth grave.

Many U.S. senior officers and uncooperative prisoners of lower rank were held in solitary confinement. Navy Captain James Mulligan was kept alone for 3½ years, Colonel Robinson Risner for 4½ years, and Air Force Colonel Fred Cherry for two years—with an unattended infected shoulder. Said Mulligan last week, "You're isolated in a small cell, with no sound, no fresh air. I was kept like an animal in a solid cage, worse than an animal. I couldn't even see out. I didn't see the moon for four years."

Fish Heads. Before 1969 food was kept at near starvation level at the more severe camps. For many prisoners, there were only two meals a-day, six hours apart, and they might consist of nothing more than a bowl of watery soup, occasionally with a fish head in it. The bread was often wormy and the rice sandy. Lieut. Commander Knutson said that he and his fellow prisoners ate with one hand on their rice and the other on their soup bowl in order to keep the cockroaches from taking over.

Much of the torture was intended to force "confessions" or extract information. Often prisoners were beaten until unconscious to get them to sign statements about the "humanity" of their treatment. U.S. officials figure that as many as 95% of the P.O.W.s captured before 1970 were tortured. Almost all broke. Said Navy Captain Allen Brady: "I never met a man with whom they were not able to gain at least some of

their objectives." Most felt, as did Army Major Floyd J. Thompson, that "these propaganda statements just weren't worth dying for."

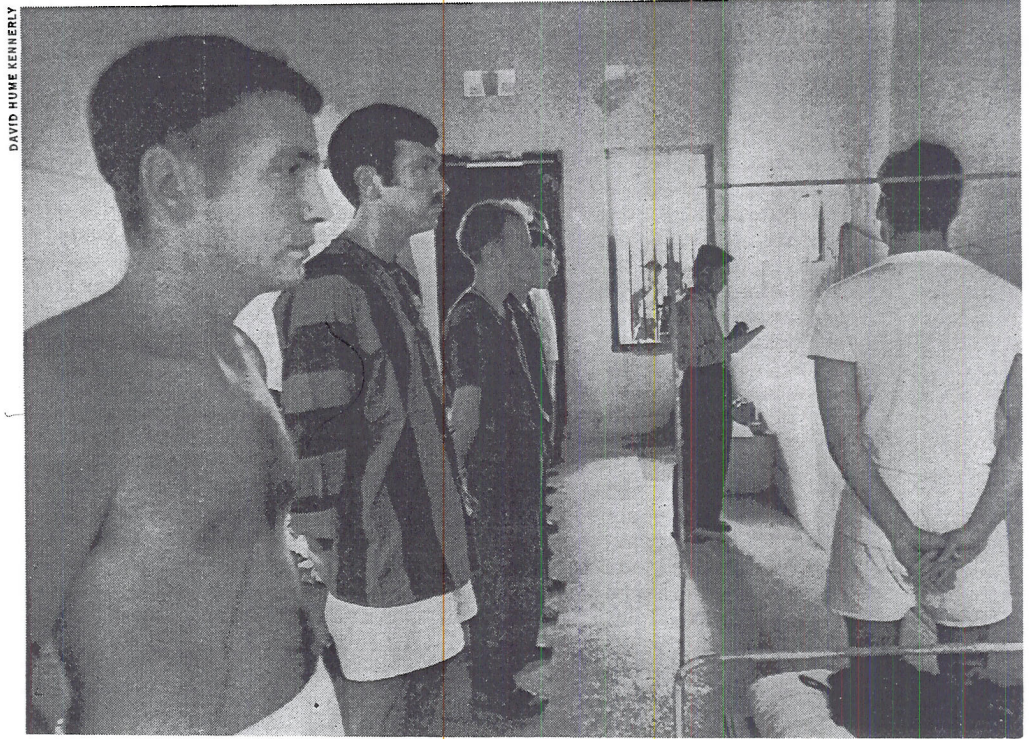
There were partial victories. When interrogators put a pistol to Captain Milligan's head to force him to give some intelligence, he gambled that none of the officers present understood English and wrote nonsense after each question. Navy Captain James Stockdale never broke. Asked for information about U.S. ships, he drew a picture of an aircraft carrier with a swimming pool and 300-ft. keel. Navy Lieut. Commander John McCain III once listed the offensive line of the Green Bay Packers as the members of his squadron.

Defense Department officials believe that many of the 55 men listed as having died in captivity in North Viet Nam did so at the hands of torturers. According to several P.O.W.s, Air Force Major Edwin Atterberry, one of two prisoners who escaped and were recaptured in 1969, was beaten to death.

Although there seemed to be far fewer beatings at the hands of the Viet Cong, conditions in the South held their own horror. One prisoner was buried up to his neck for days. Another, who was suffering from dysentery, was denied medical assistance and finally suffocated in his own excrement. For those well enough to walk, there were endless work details. Army Major William Hardy, captured in 1967, figures that the Viet Cong "treated me like a slave" because he is black and "they believed all they heard about Negroes still being treated like slaves in the U.S."

Colonel Risner named Oct. 15, 1969 as the beginning of improvement in the prisoners' treatment. The credit for the change seems to belong to all the people who tried at about that time to focus world attention on the plight of the P.O.W.s—President Nixon, the wives of

AMERICAN P.O.W.s AT "THE ZOO" IN HANOI JUST BEFORE RELEASE



DAVID HUME KENNEDY

the P.O.W.s, Congress and the media. Embarrassed by world pressure, the politburo in Hanoi may have passed the word to go easier. At any rate, prisoners were allowed for the first time to exercise outdoors for 30 minutes, but behind bamboo screens so that they could not see each other; they got a third daily meal of bread and water, and a third blanket. They began to pass their days in boredom rather than fear. Milligan began to raise a family of spiders in his cell, and watched geckos "mate with each other and grow old."

By the winter of 1970 most of the prisoners had been taken out of solitary or small-group cells into large open cell blocks that held about 45 men. It was after they were put together that they were able to organize—and even coordinate a resistance of sorts.

They called themselves the "Fourth Combined P.O.W. Wing." Each camp had its own American commandant, as it were. The prisoners adopted Air Force organizational tables—wings, squadrons, operations. A tap code and a hand code were the most effective methods of communicating, but everything helped—the modulations of a cough, the syncopated swipe of a broom.

Flag. By late 1971 the organization had solidified enough to stage its own psychological warfare. On Dec. 7 they staged a church service in the "Hanoi Hilton." Their North Vietnamese captors called it "the riot." On that day the Fourth Combined P.O.W. Wing ordered a mass prayer service in defiance of camp regulations prohibiting meetings of more than 20 men. Ordered to stop, they prayed even louder. When the wing leaders were taken outside the cell block, those inside broke into *The Star-Spangled Banner*.

Such exercises in symbolism proved immensely valuable in sustaining morale. Air Force Lieut. Colonel John Dramesi, who escaped with Atterberry in 1969 but was recaptured, began in the fall of 1971 to laboriously stitch together an American flag. He used the threads from a yellow blanket for the gold embroidery, pieces of red nylon underwear and red thread from a handkerchief, white threads from a towel and patches of blue from a North Vietnamese jacket. The flag often flew at night in the Hanoi Hilton cell block that he shared with 40 other men, and it was dutifully saluted. "I thought that a flag could be a symbol to which we could attach ourselves, so that we could retain our honor and respect," says Dramesi.

In much the same manner as the prisoners sustained themselves on such bits of symbolism, the U.S. has now turned toward the P.O.W.s as uplifting symbols—victors, in the sense of having survived, in a war that was never won, patriots in a land that had grown weary of flag waving. For the moment, their return has provided the only solace at the end of what President Nixon last week described as "the longest and most difficult war in our history."

Beyond the Worst Suspicions

On Aug. 3, 1966 TIME's Donald Neff, then a Saigon correspondent, interviewed Air Force Ace Major James Kasler—one of the legendary figures of the Viet Nam War—just after his 72nd mission. The story that went to press that week dubbed Kasler a "one-man Air Force" and perhaps the "hottest" pilot in Southeast Asia. Five days later, Kasler buckled into the cockpit of his F-105 Thunderchief for his 73rd—and last—mission. His plane was hit by ground fire, and he was forced to eject. He was held prisoner until a month ago.

and hid him under banana leaves.

Once the planes had left, Kasler was lashed to a board and driven north in the back of a pickup truck. At each village, he says, "people would hit me and throw rocks and mud at me, and the guards would hit me in the mouth—I guess to show how tough they were. In one village, they gave a little girl a bayonet and took pictures of her holding it to my throat. Big heroine! When we reached Hoa Lo prison camp [the so-called Hanoi Hilton] they put me on a cement floor, and interrogators told me that I must write a 'confession of crimes against the Vietnamese people.' I refused."

His guards soon began to beat him. "I couldn't believe they would beat an injured prisoner. Later I found out that that was their technique to break you. You're most vulnerable when first captured and injured. I finally wrote something like 'We should seek peace at the peace table.'" His reward was a shot of penicillin.

Kasler's right thighbone had been set with an iron clamp when he reached Hanoi, but the leg continued to swell under his full body cast. The cast was finally removed and the leg lanced, but the infection spread and the leg puffed up to twice its normal size. For most of that first winter, he lay in fever, alternately freezing and roasting. His roommate, Air Force Captain John Brodak of St. Louis, gave up his own blanket to keep Kasler warm in the 40° nights. "I'm probably

here because of his care," says Kasler. (Brodak, now a major, was released with Kasler.) Often the bandages were not changed for a week and a half. "It was horrible," says Kasler. "All the gore was running out, and flies and mosquitoes flocked to the wound. At one point the stench became so bad that we got a piece of oilcloth to wrap around the leg to hold down the smell." His weight dropped from 167 to 125 lbs. When he asked to see a doctor for his draining leg, he was refused.

By mid-August 1967, the torturing of prisoners in Kasler's building began in earnest (he had been moved from the Hanoi Hilton to another prison in the capital, "the Zoo—that's what it reminded us of"). The Vietnamese had discovered that the Americans were communicating with each other by tapping on the concrete walls, and wanted to know who was guilty. Kasler certainly was. With the prisoners' special tap code, he said, he "could send a message through five rooms and get an answer



KASLER DEMONSTRATING TORTURE AT HOME
"They had a lot of tricks."

Last week Neff again interviewed Kasler, now a full colonel, at his home in Indianapolis, and filed this account of the intervening 6½ years:

AS soon as I was out, I knew I was hurt," says Kasler. "My right thigh was broken, and a piece of bone about eight inches long had split off and jammed into my groin. I landed near some paddies 50 miles south of Hanoi. About 15 villagers jumped me and tore off all my clothes except my shorts. Then they saw my leg. In about five minutes a medic came, gave me a shot and made a splint out of a banana tree. They put me in a fish net and started carrying me—when the planes came."

Word that he had been shot down had touched off a massive rescue effort by nearly 50 U.S. planes. But for Kasler the Viet Nam War was all over, and he wished that they would go away. He was in intense pain and very thirsty, but because of the presence of U.S. planes overhead his captors laid him in a ditch

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back in ten minutes. We really got pretty fast at it." The price for being caught was high. Although his leg was still draining, Kasler was subjected to all manner of rope and iron tortures.

"They had these iron manacles with a screw that they could clamp on your wrists or ankles. They'd take your wrists, put them behind you and screw down those manacles to the bone. Then they'd take a rope and pull it through your upper arms and squeeze your arms together or pull them up. They had a lot of tricks."

Magoo. "Many men had their wrists broken and their arms dislocated. The sessions lasted about 45 minutes and they were always accompanied by beatings with fists, slapping on the ears so hard that eardrums were ruptured. The guards looked for any little infraction so they could beat you. Our guard—we called him 'Magoo' because he looked like the cartoon character, all squinty—was vicious. He used to come in the cell about twice a week and beat John Brodak and me. Sometimes he'd beat us for no cause, just open the door, come in and knock us around."

From the fall of 1967 through the spring of 1968, Kasler was tortured frequently by Magoo and an interrogator called "the Elf," because he was a wizened 75-pounder. Kasler was moved into solitary confinement, where he got little medical attention, even though his leg was still swollen and badly infected. But the worst was yet to come. The violent antiwar reaction in the U.S. that followed the Communist 1968 *Tet* offensive apparently convinced Hanoi that the war could be won by propaganda. A maximum effort was made at the Zoo to get prisoners to appear before various peace delegations and press conferences.

For Kasler, the harshest treatment began on June 25, 1968. He was called before an interrogator nicknamed "Spot" (because he had a white spot on the right side of his head). "He was cordial. He asked me to sit down, gave me a cigarette, asked me about my family—I'd been allowed one letter at that point. He said he was trying to select a man to celebrate the downing of the 3,000th U.S. plane to tell the American people the truth about the war and appear on TV. I said I wasn't the guy. He said I must. The Vietnamese people had saved my life, he said, had fed me. I said I owed him nothing.

"They demanded that I surrender. They hit me on the ears. They gave me the rope-and-irons treatment for 45 minutes, then had me kneel, then the irons again. I finally passed out. The third time they gave me the rope-and-irons treatment, I said, 'I surrender.'

"They just continued torturing me. They pulled my arms until I passed out again. They made me write that I had sabotaged the Geneva Accords—it was the whole Communist line. They had this big deal coming up for the Fourth of July with a delegation from some-



KASLER GETTING BODY CAST

"I had discovered a way to endure. I would start the Lord's Prayer . . ."

UPI



MID-AUGUST 1966

where and they badly wanted me to appear before it." Kasler firmly resisted. At one point during a torture session, yet another interrogator pulled out a bunch of newspaper clippings from the U.S. showing all the peace demonstrations. "In one of the pictures, I saw way in the background two guys with American Legion hats holding a sign that said 'Drop the Bomb.' That really bolstered me."

The next morning the interrogator returned with a Caucasian. He was about 35 and six feet tall, black-haired, brown-eyed, and spoke idiomatic English. He was a specialist in torture. The prisoners called him Fidel because he seemed to be Latin, but no one really had any idea where he came from. He obviously was a high official of some Communist country, because he lorded it over the Vietnamese.

Fidel grabbed Kasler by the shirt and demanded, "Who knows you are resisting?" Kasler answered: "Nobody." "Then why?" asked Fidel. "For myself." Fidel promised treatment for Kasler's leg, better food and conditions if he would go before the July 4 delegation. "I refused. He ordered me back on my knees. My broken leg was still killing me. My arms were in irons behind my back. He worked on them with the rope for a while. Then he got a thin wire and wired my thumbs and hands together. He tortured me, working on the rope and wire and irons. After about 45 minutes I was punchy. But I found I had discovered a way to endure."

Shreds. "As long as I could concentrate on something else, it seemed as though I could stand the pain. I would start saying the Lord's Prayer, and when I forgot a line I would go back over it and over it. Finally Fidel knocked me over on the floor and asked if I surrendered. I said no."

The torture continued for days. Fidel would beat Kasler across the buttocks with a large white truck fan belt until "he tore my rear end to shreds." At

one point Fidel said, "You are going to see a delegation if we have to carry you on a stretcher." For one three-day period, Kasler was beaten with the fan belt every hour from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m., and kept awake at night.

"By noon the third day I couldn't keep control of my mind. I said I surrendered. They kept beating me on the hour until 6 p.m. By this time I had a gash over the eye where my head had hit the edge of the bed during one beating, my leg was throbbing and bleeding, my back was bloody. I signed a statement agreeing to do everything the camp commandant ordered."

Kasler was allowed to sleep that night. His mosquito net, which had been taken away, was given back, thus sparing him at least the torment of insect bites. For the next two days the guards kept asking him if he surrendered and each time he said that he did. But on the third day his strength was partly back and he answered no.

"I think I made a tactical error. It was around 7 a.m. on a Sunday. Four guards came in and put me on my knees. They began slapping me around. Soon they were using their fists, and one of them pulled out a fan belt and began beating me with it. One blow by a fist on the ear ruptured my eardrum. Blood was pouring down my head. A kick popped one of my ribs. They turned into mad dogs. They began smashing my head against the concrete floor, kicking my bad leg. It went on for three hours. I think some other guards finally had to stop them.

"I lay in a stupor for three days. I was in terrible pain. They had dislodged the iron pin in my leg during the beating, and it was shoved three-quarters of an inch up into my hip. My mouth was so bruised that I could not open my teeth for five days."

A week later Fidel asked Kasler if he surrendered. "I decided I'd say yes, and then resist when they asked me to do something." He was put in a room

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with fresh air, and given cigarettes and chewing gum. Though under threat of death, he communicated once again with his fellow captives. "The guys didn't recognize my old call signal, so I just kept sending my own name. Finally old Norm Wells [Lieut. Colonel Norman Wells had been one of Kasler's wingmen] came up in the next room. Boy, it was good to hear him."

But Kasler's leg continued to get worse, and his morale ebbed. "I started to go downhill rapidly. I lay on my bed all day, dreading when the food came around because I had to get up to get it at the door of my cell." Finally, in the winter of 1968, he was taken back to the hospital. X rays showed that an operation was necessary. One of the guards told him that his leg had to be amputated. The wound was cleaned out, however, the iron clamp removed and the leg was finally on its way to healing—nearly 2½ years after it had been broken. In early February 1969, Kasler was returned to the Zoo, and got a roommate, Navy Commander Peter Schoeffel, who had been shot down in 1967. He had spent a total of 18 months in solitary confinement since his capture.

Killed. The torture continued through the spring and summer of 1969. But that July, under threat of more beatings, Kasler wrote one last statement "about the struggle of the great Vietnamese people." He was never tortured again, though others were.

By October 1969, conditions noticeably improved for the prisoners—but were still not good. Kasler and others were moved in December 1969 to the Hanoi Hilton, where there was a room called Heart Break. In it, new captives and men who had cracked mentally under torture were placed in stocks in their beds, unable to move. Three unbalanced Americans were held there. "We could hear them in our room. We pleaded with the guards to let them come to our cell, but were turned down. Two of them just eventually disappeared. We saw the other's name on a list of dead. All told, at least 15 men were either killed during torture or were not accounted for."

Sitting in his comfortable Indianapolis apartment last week with his wife Martha, Kasler, now 47, looked amazingly fit. He wears glasses and his hair is grayer. But he walks without a limp, and he still has a quick smile and a soft chuckle. He had already caught up with the latest fashions and was sporting bright blue bell bottoms. Touching his short hair, he chuckled and said that he planned to let it grow a bit. Despite all his pain, Kasler displayed remarkably little bitterness—except when he mentioned Fidel. "I'd like to meet him some day," he said softly. But for now, Kasler was looking forward to some rest and then spending a year at the Air Force War College. His goal: command of a wing (two squadrons) of fighter aircraft. At heart, he is still very much a fighter pilot.

NEW YORK

Rocky's Slip Shows

When New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller told an international conference in Amsterdam last week that "we are living in a fluid period—more so than any other period of history," his words had a pathetically heartfelt ring. Though referring publicly to world affairs, Rockefeller was doubtless pondering in private the vagaries of politics back in New York City, where his grand design to hand-pick the next mayor had suddenly—and for Rocky, embarrassingly—come unraveled.

Republican Rockefeller had joined with New York Liberal Party Chief Alex Rose in tapping an unlikely can-



GOVERNOR NELSON ROCKEFELLER
A dream swiftly evaporating.

didate to run with their mutual blessing: Democrat Robert F. Wagner, 62, who served as mayor from 1954 to 1965. With a display of bosslike cajolery that had few parallels even in the turbulent world of New York politics, Rocky forced a majority of the city's G.O.P. leaders to accept Wagner. The leaders were naturally reluctant to back the man whom they had blamed for mismanaging the city for so long.

It was Wagner himself who solved the Republican leaders' dilemma. Angered over Republican slurs—a Bronx chief, John Calandra, had called him "a moron"—he rejected the G.O.P. endorsement. Said Wagner: "These Republican politicians could not care less about good government or what happens to New York City in the next four years." Hearing the news in Amsterdam, Rocky said weakly that he still considered Wagner "the best possibility for pulling the city together and being a healer in a very difficult period."

Still armed with the Liberals' en-

dorsement, Wagner was vague on whether he would run for mayor at all. If he does, it is likely to be as a liberal independent, the same double-barreled tag worn by John V. Lindsay when he was elected to his second term four years ago.

Wagner's demurrer left the mayoral race in a state of high confusion. Republican State Senator John Marchi, 51, a law-and-order, balance-the-budget conservative from Staten Island who ran a poor third in the last mayoral election, now seems certain to win the G.O.P. nomination. The party's five county leaders seemed to like Marchi's brand of independent conservatism and quickly gave him their endorsement. Six candidates are vying for the Democratic slot. And then there is Wagner.

There is also Rockefeller, his dream of having a beholden mayor in City Hall swiftly evaporating. While he is probably not damaged in any lasting way, and still has his eye on an unprecedented fifth term as Governor and even the U.S. presidency, Rocky's political slip was showing last week in a way that must have made him blush.

CRIME

On the Decline

At last the U.S. crime rate seems to be going down. The FBI announced last week that its preliminary 1972 figures on serious offenses showed a decline of 3%. It was the first decrease since the current system of gathering statistics was adopted in 1960.

Violent crime—murder, rape, aggravated assault—was still going up by 1%. The increase occurred principally in the West and the South, while there were declines in the Northeastern and North Central states. Nationwide, rape showed the greatest rise (11%), increasing mostly in suburban areas.

The overall decline was due to a decrease in the far larger number of property-oriented crimes: robbery, burglary, larceny and auto theft. There is some question as to whether police efforts have been as important to that trend as the increasing tendency to resort to such individual defensive tactics as private alarm systems and auto steering-wheel locks.

The crime total in actual numbers is not yet complete, though the FBI concluded that it had enough figures to make the percentage assessments. In any case, while the crime rate may be slightly down, it is still cruelly high. One measure of just how cruel it is showed up last week in a more limited survey taken by the Associated Press. In one week this March, the A.P. counted 350 U.S. gunshot fatalities. In previous surveys, three separate weeks in 1968 and 1969 had averaged about 200 such deaths each week—suggesting a 70% rise over four years. Perhaps, it was just a bad week.