P.O.W.'s Felt Their Mission Was to Resist

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LOS ANGELES, April 29—"Everybody says we had nothing to do, but we did have something to do, we had an obligation to fulfill," Lieut. Col. Alan Lurie said recently. "That was to follow the Code of Conduct, to resist the North Vietnamese attempts to exploit us. And that was a full-time job in that situation."

Colonel Lurie is one of 587 former prisoners of war who have returned to this country in recent months. As they have bounded off planes, hugged wives and children, held news conferences, thrown out first balls and waved to countless cheering crowds, the American public has been surprised to find them so well and alert after an ordeal that lasted as long as eight years.

Probably the most important explanation for their condition was noted by Colonel Lurie, an articulate, pipe-smoking father of three children. The prisoners did not waste away, nor did they merely try to survive. They had a positive, and, they felt, vital mission—resistance.

That mission provided the structure and purpose of life for most of the prisoners, particularly the more than 80 per cent captured in North Vietnam. And it helped produce the extraordinary uniformity and zealous patriotism that have marked their public utterances since their return.

The New York Times has reviewed the public comments of nearly 100 returned men and interviewed several dozen in depth. The "battle of Hanoi" as one prisoner called it, emerges as a complex and fascinating story of men under extreme stress.

The tales of torture seem genuine, but physical brutality played a rather small part in the lives of many inmates, particularly those shot down more recently. And it is still uncertain how the prisoners' fierce commitment to resist a despised enemy has colored their accounts of prison life.

The story is complex in other ways. Men captured in the North were often incarcerated in old French prisons and sometimes spent years in the same cell. Prisoners taken in South Vietnam lived main-

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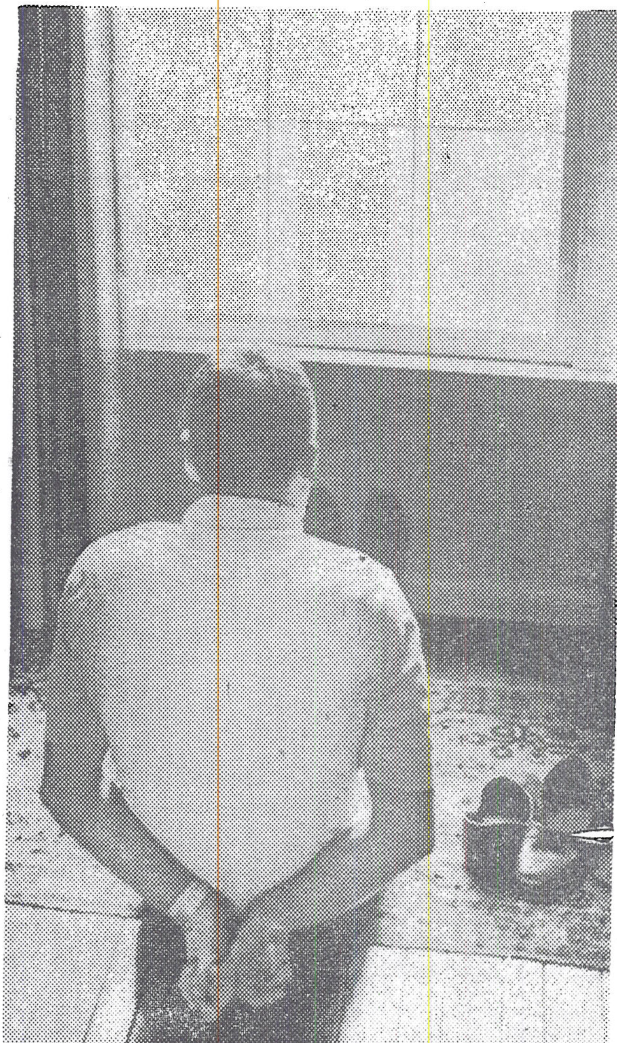
WOW! Sue's at "Burger In The Park" 45th & 6th — ADV'T.

HE'S coming! Chubby the "Hip" Cherub is coming to fight the V.D. epidemic! Adv.



Associated Press

In his home, Adm. Jeremiah A. Denton recently showed a position for torture used by North Vietnamese.

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ly in jungle camps and moved constantly with the tides of war.

These southern prisoners were seldom able to communicate or organize among themselves, but the northern camps were organized, with the senior officers taking command, from the earliest days. Usually the prisoners in North Vietnam presented a united front, but a few opposed the war, and defied the authority of their seniors in the name of "consciences."

The "battle of Hanoi" involved two sides, each dedicated to a cause, each hating and fearing the other, and the mixture was explosive.

The North Vietnamese were furious at the American pilots who had bombed their country. As one Communist official said to a journalist recently: "What would have happened if we were bombing the United States and one of our pilots was shot down over Pittsburgh?" They wanted to "punish" the captives as "criminals," not war prisoners; to exploit them for military and propaganda purposes, and to humiliate them in a way some prisoners felt was tinged with racism and sexual perversion.

The Americans, on the other hand, were outraged at being captured by a backward, Communist country they considered socially, militarily and morally inferior; they habitually referred to their captors as "sleazy gooks," and worse.

The initial mistreatment they received only aggravated their animosity, and brought them to the point where they consciously "forced" the North

Lieut. David Rehmann of the Navy at home in Garden Grove, Calif.

Associated Press

Lieutenant Rehmann after his jet was shot down in 1966. He said, "Dying in a prison camp wouldn't achieve anything."

Vietnamese to be "brutal" to them before they would obey any directives.

Locked in Same Cage

Captor and captive, locked in the same cage, with no chance of escape.

An essential element of the resistance struggle was a process one prisoner called "reverse brainwashing." As Air Force Maj. Ronald Webb explained: "The Communists spent upwards of four, five, six, seven, eight, nine years trying to turn us against our country, against our way of life, against America basically. And the natural reaction on the part of 99 per cent of us was to build our patriotism even stronger."

Comdr. Claude Clower once received a package from his wife containing a washcloth with a flower design. The center of the flower was blue with white stars; the petals were red and white stripes. For three years, Commander Clower and his roommates pledged allegiance every morning to the washcloth.

Moreover, the men maintained a deep and almost desperate belief that the Vietnam war was worth it, and that the President would, in fact, gain "peace wtih honor."

"Maybe we developed it ourselves, that we spent so much time, that this time was not lost," commented Lieut. Col. James E. Hiteshew of the Air Force. "I mean we didn't want to feel that we spent six years there for nothing. That would be pretty difficult, and we'd be a pretty bitter bunch of individuals."

No Typical Prisoner

"So we came out," he told a news conference earlier this month, "and in our minds we had done what we intended to do, we had accomplished it, and we wanted to tell everybody else that job has been accomplished."

There is no typical prisoner, or a typical day in prison life. Inmates were scattered in about a dozen different camps at different times; they were treated differently according to when and where they were captured, and according to their will, and ability, to resist.

The worst treatment was meted out to the senior officers who led the resistance, the men who have tended to get the most publicity. As Colonel Lurie noted, the military cliché of "rank has its privileges" was "reversed 180 degrees" in the prison camps.

But all the men fought common foes—time, boredom, the drabness of a life that lacked the color of a spring sky, or the sound of a woman's laughter.

The prison experience in North Vietnam—and to some extent in South Vietnam and Laos—was divided into three main stages. From August of 1964, when Lieut. Comdr. Everett Alvarez was shot down, to October of 1969, conditions were very harsh. Life was marked by poor food, long periods of isolation and the constant threat of physical torture.

In October, 1969, conditions improved—primarily, it appears, in response to a massive letter-writing campaign demanding better treatment. During this second, or transitional, phase, the food got a little better, brutality decreased sharply and men were gradually allowed to live in larger groups.

In November, 1970, the unsuccessful raid on the Son Tay prison camp moved the North Vietnamese to consolidate most of their prisoners at Hoa Lo, the notorious "Hanoi Hilton," for greater security. The food continued to improve, as did the delivery of mail and packages.

As many as 57 men lived in one huge room, and while they were crowded, they could organize and amuse themselves far more effectively, and they created a bureaucracy that would have made the Pentagon envious.

To understand this experience, one must start with the men who lived it. Most of them were well trained and highly motivated professional fliers. One referred to himself as being in the "bombing business."

During the early years, once the captives arrived in Hanoi, most of them were placed in the "Heartbreak Hotel" section of the Hanoi Hilton, and subjected to the standard torture routine—the now-famous "rope trick," in which a man is tied so tightly into a ball that the circulation in his arms is cut off, and his toes are forced up under his chin.

There were many variations, including hanging a man upside down from a meat hook, but the result was usually the same.

'You Can Be Broken'

At first, the interrogators were seeking mainly military information. Almost every prisoner wound up giving a good deal more than his name, rank and serial number, and for many, this was the lowest point in their entire captivity. Out of touch with other Americans, and unaware of their experiences, the new prisoners lacerated themselves with guilt.

Lieut. David Rehmann remembers thinking that he would be condemned as a traitor, and ostracized from the United States. Lieut. Col. Leo K. Thorsness of the Air Force added:

"We feel that we are superior, and I think and hope rightfully so, but there you learn by yourself, that you can be broken, and you feel I am the only man this has happened to, everybody else has been able to stand up for however many days it goes on, and it's a fantastically traumatic experience and thoughts of suicide ran through my mind."

This question of torture is difficult to place in perspective. Undoubtedly, many men suffered considerable pain, particularly the camp leaders. But some dissident prisoners feel that the intense hatred toward the "gooks" has caused some returned men to "exaggerate" their descriptions of torture. These dissidents, and antiwar activists who have been studying the prisoner of war issue, raise these further questions:

¶There are few accounts of deliberate torture toward several groups of prisoners—those captured after 1969, those captured in South Vietnam, and all civilians. However, the southerners were forced to work and did suffer severely from disease.

¶After all the prisoners returned last month, and the men were able to tell their full stories, the Pentagon set up a series of news conferences across the country. These conferences tended to spotlight senior officers, and others with particularly horrifying tales to tell, and the result was a somewhat distorted picture of everyday prison life. Even among the older prisoners, some did not suffer much outright torture after their first few weeks of captivity.

¶Prisoners who absorbed the most punishment were folk heroes to their comrades, and the critics wonder whether some prisoners have inflated their stories, even unconsciously, to enhance their reputations as "tough nuts."

¶Moreover, as Colonel Hiteshew noted, many prisoners feel a deep need to justify the war and the damage done to North Vietnam. And critics wonder whether that desire for justification has also led the prisoners to emphasize the worst aspects of their captivity.

Campaign on 'Confessions'

The Communists placed great emphasis on propaganda, and in 1966 they began a campaign of extracting "confessions" of "war crimes" from prisoners that might be used at the Bertrand Russell war crimes tribunal.

At this point, the organization and communication among prisoners was rudimentary. But from the beginning, the senior man in any given group was in charge; as the saying went, "If you're solo [solitary] you're in command."

Thus the senior officers faced the difficult task of interpreting the Code of Conduct and forging some sort of unified policy. One line of reasoning held that the men were helpless, that they could not withstand endless physical harassment, and that some sort of compromise position should be established.

Communications Code

But Adm. Jeremiah A. Denton and others took a tough line. When he was senior ranking officer in a camp called the Zoo, the admiral—then a captain—found out that some men were cooperating "due to mere intimidation from threats."

"I put out the policy that they were not to succumb to threats, but must stand up and say no," recalled the admiral. "Figuratively speaking, we now began to lie on the railroad tracks hoping that the sheer bulk of our bodies would slow down the train. We forced them to be brutal to us. . . ."

At the time of Admiral Denton's directive, the men communicated through a primitive code by tapping on the walls between rooms. The letter "K" was dropped, and the alphabet arranged in five rows of five letters each. A letter was transmitted by first tapping out its row, and then its place in the row. "B" was thus one tap and then two taps; "J" two taps and then five.

Later, when men could catch glimpses of each other, the basic code was transmitted by blinking, the sweeping of a broom, coughs, and an almost infinite number of variations. It was also augmented by a visual flash code, similar to the one used by deaf and dumb persons, and notes written on toilet paper with everything from cigarette ash to blood.

Lieut. Col. Lewis Shattuck remembers that one of the first things he heard after learning the code was Admiral Denton's exhortation to "bounce back" after torture "to the original hard line." "It was the first time I realized that I was not the only guy who had been busted," he said.

That incident illustrates one of the critical elements of prison life—the ability to communicate, to shore each other up and give moral support. Every time a man returned from a "quiz," he got a verbal pat on the back through the wall. "By this," explained Col. Robinson Risner, "you were able to take a lot more and come back quicker for another dose."

The prisoners were not always unified. There is a specific policy against accepting early release, for instance, but a dozen men did come home over the years. Not everyone liked the hard-line, "bounce back" policy, either. A few men objected strongly to the war and spoke out against it; in one camp a young civilian barely escaped serious injury when he hastily retracted an endorsement of flag-burning.

A Whole Way of Life

For the large majority of prisoners, however, resistance became not just a matter of following orders, but a whole way of life. Some things they did were "juvenile," they admit, but good for morale.

"We learned to reverse everything the guards said," explained Colonel Shattuck. "If they said 'quickly' we interpreted it to mean 'slowly.'" If one room was given cookies on a given day, the men tapped around to other rooms to make sure they were not getting "special favors."

More importantly, they continued to absorb physical punishment, even though they knew they would eventually give in. "I wasn't worried about living, but I was worried about honor," explained Commander Clower, who commanded two different camps at various times. "I wanted to be able to walk home with my head held high and say I did the best job I could."

Lieut. Col. Lewis W. Shattuck remembers the time "I realized that I was not the only guy who had been busted."

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Added Colonel Shattuck: "The only weapons we had were our bodies and our pain."

In fact, the determination grew as the treatment got worse. "Pain makes you mad; in my view it's very strengthening," said Comdr. William Stark.

By 1967, in Alan Lurie's words, "The 'V' [North Vietnamese] finally got the full impact. Everyone was resisting, everyone was saying no to the same things." That brought about another purge, aimed at finding out the prisoners' organization and methods of communication. Tension gripped the camps.

Mental Harassment

"There were two kinds of prisoners," said Commander Clower with a laugh. "Those who admit they were afraid and those who are lying."

"Hearing that guard walk up on the porch and rattle his key, wondering what cell he would open, became a very nerve-racking experience," remembered Commander Stark. "I don't feel very good about it, but I always had a small sense of relief when I heard another door open."

During this early period, the guards used mental as well as physical harassment. Some men, usually those who had been identified for propaganda purposes, were allowed to write home. Others were held virtually incommunicado for years. The aim, the Vietnamese admitted, was to "confuse" and "punish" both the prisoners and their families.

Often an interrogator would casually tell a prisoner, "your wife hasn't written because she has found another."

The guards dropped so many hints to Commander Clower about his teen-age daughter that he was sure she had run off and gotten married or pregnant—which she had not.

Probably the worst mental torture was solitary confinement. Capt. Harry Jenkins, who was considered a "troublemaker" and spent more than four years "solo," devised the formula of "praying, planning and pacing" as the key to survival.

As a senior officer, Air Force Col. Norman Gaddis spent 1,000 days in solitary and described it this way:

"I did not see but one other American for a matter of 10 seconds in 1968. In 1969 I attended a church service. The service lasted for 20 minutes and that is the first time I had been near an American in about 31 or 32 months . . . At the end of 1,000 days of solitary confinement I felt somewhat like an animal. I was reduced, I think, to the very lowest depth that a person can reach."

Most prisoners spent some time in solitary when they first arrived, but as the camps began to fill up, the rank and file tended to live in small groups of two or three. Under this system of "semi-isolation," the men were let outside to wash for only about 10 minutes a day and were prohibited from talking to anybody but their roommates.

Identical Meals

Food consisted of two identical meals a day: a watery vegetable soup, usually cabbage or pumpkin or something called "sewer greens" because of their small, and either bread or rice.

Lieut. Col. Kenneth W. North remembers finding cockroaches and worms cooked right in with the food—and eating them all. "I figured, 'hell, it's protein,'" he commented.

The prisoners contend that medical care was often used as the lever to gain cooperation; when it was provided, it equaled what the Vietnamese received, but that was very poor by American standards.

Injured pilots often set their own broken limbs or extracted teeth with rusty nails.

Two Prime Topics

The basic way of passing time was talk, and two prime topics were food and sex. Often roommates would plan elaborate meals for each other and then "serve" them on different nights.

In such close quarters, few things remained secret for long, and, as Capt. Michael Burns put it, "guys would just tell a lot of things about their wives. I've known many wives intimately."

Even the smallest task was stretched out to fill the void. Two men stole a piece of bamboo and spent two hours a day folding and ironing their blankets to razar sharpness. Exercise was the favorite diversion, and Comdr. Frederick Baldock said he did 4,400 situps at one stretch.

Memories of home were both happy and painful, and many men became callous and "dead inside." Alan Lurie found he could not visualize his wife and children. "My mind just cut off that circuit," he explained. "That was the way I was most vulnerable, the way I could be hurt the easiest."

Joy was measured in very small drops. Colonel Lurie spent an entire year anticipating a few hours of classical music that was played over the camp radio on New Year's Eve. Comdr. Dale Osborne remembers the beauty of a green leaf set against a blue sky—the first time he had seen so much color in two years.

Taught Each Other

Privacy was nil. Roommates grated on each other's nerves. One man calculated that he had had more "direct contact" with his roommate than he would with his wife in 70 years of marriage.

Ultimately they ran out of things to talk about, and time sat like a huge boulder on their backs. As Colonel Shattuck put it, "You were with the same guys 48 hours a day, 14 days a week, 24 months a year."

Communications was thus vitally important for sanity as well as for information and morale. Through the painstaking tap code, men taught each other poetry, math and languages. Claude Clower still has a 2,000-word Spanish dictionary he copied down in minute writing and hid in a bar of soap.

A rather sick form of humor lightened the gloom. Lieut. Col. Alan L. Brunstrom once sent a message that his room was serving free beer and pizza to all comers. Two men who were in shackles at the time declined the invitation by saying, "We're all tied up."

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Lieut. Col. Alan P. Lurie said resistance "was a full-time job."

In October, 1969, when things improved, many of the men were in poor shape, physically and mentally. As Alan Lurie put it, "Maybe we were all crazy; we had no reference point."

South Was Worse

Conditions in South Vietnam, however, were far worse. Generally the men lived in jungle camps, often chained to small bamboo cages. They lived the miserable life of the guerrilla soldier, and suffered terribly from undernnourishment, overwork and such tropical diseases as beri-beri.

Maj. Floyd Kushner, a flight surgeon captured in 1967, said that 10 men had died in his arms, including two who gave up "because it was too hard to live—they said, "We can't hack it any more."

Only in 1971, when most of the southern prisoners were moved north, did they start to receive decent treatment, he said.

During the early days, many prisoners were tortured into making antiwar statements, but about seven or eight really did oppose the war and voluntarily made public statements against it. Once the threat of torture was lifted, the senior officers encouraged the dissidents to rejoin the fold, and all but two did—Navy Captain Walter E. Wilber and Marine Lieut. Col. Edison Miller.

Thought War Illegal

Captain Wilber believed that the war was illegal, and that the Code of Conduct did not apply. But he also insists that he never gave away any military secrets or harmed another prisoner.

When they refused to stop making statements or see visiting delegations, Captain Wilber and Colonel Miller were "relieved of command" by the senior officers and threatened with courts-martial when they returned home.

Colonel Miller has refused to talk to reporters, but Captain Wilber describes his decision as a question of "conscience." "The thing I was trying to do is get the American people to ask themselves why we are in Vietnam and let them make up their own minds," he explained.

He conceded, however, that he was never allowed to talk freely with visiting delegations. All questions were submitted in advance, and he had to write out answers and have them approved by his captors, he said.

Last spring, the renewed bombing produced a new crop of captives. These younger pilots had been exposed to the antiwar movement at home and shared some of its feelings of futility. The North Vietnamese sensed this. They treated the newcomers well, with adequate food and little physical abuse, and kept them separate from the hard-line veterans.

The only senior officers the younger pilots met were Captain Wilber and Colonel Miller. These men helped stir the antiwar sentiment that was already brewing, and a number of prisoners signed statements opposing the bombing and met with such visitors as Ramsey Clark and Jane Fonda.

(However, at least one prisoner, Lieut. Comdr. David Hoffman, says he was tortured to meet the two visitors.)

The Paradox

The embittered veteran prisoners valued uniformity and discipline above all. But the newer inmates — a whole generation younger, shaped in an entirely different era — stressed "conscience" and "morality." Captain Wilber and Colonel Miller were ostracized by the veterans for defying the senior officers, but to some younger men they were heroes. As Air Force Capt. Lynn Guenther, shot down in December of 1971, said: "They took a lot of heat and stood up for what they believed in."

Like Captain Guenther, Capt. Karl Logan openly opposed the war. During his college days in Southern California, the young officer "knew and respected people with quite liberal views," he explained, and added: "I did what I knew to be right, what my morality told me was the correct thing to do."

This is the paradox of the prisoners of war. They survived because of their unity; they "lived on loyalty" as one put it. They "brainwashed" themselves to believe more fervently than ever in the wisdom of the war and the good intentions of the Government. As Colonel Hiteshew said, "We were always behind the Administration, no matter who it was."

But the very war they were fighting caused at least some segments of the country to lose faith in that wisdom and those good intentions. During the time the prisoners spent in North Vietnam, the "credibility gap" became a national institution; skepticism became a pervasive attitude; people followed the dictates of their morality, not their Government, in a massive outpouring of public protest.

Position of Dissidents

To the returning prisoners, the answer to this division and disruption is a renewal of national pride, a resurgence of the patriotism they feel has been lost. After so many years with so little, they see the best in their country, the doughnut rather than the hole, and most agree with Colonel Thorsness when he says, "I'd like to see every flag double in size and talk about apple pie and motherhood for the rest of my life."

A few dissident prisoners and their allies in the antiwar movement find this flag-waving dangerous. To them, Colonel Thorsness is expressing the sort of uncritical, over-confident attitude that they feel got the country involved in Vietnam in the first place.

They tend to focus on the hole in the doughnut. They feel that skepticism is a sign of health, not disease. And they are afraid that in the rush to exalt the prisoners of war and recite the litany of "peace with honor," the hard-won lessons of Vietnam are in danger of being lost.