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THE PRISONER OF WAR: AN ANALYSIS AND COMPARISON OF
THE TREATMENT AND CONDITIONS THE AMERICAN PRISONER
OF WAR HAS BEEN EXPOSED TO DURING THE VIETNAM WAR
(RESEARCH AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCE)

CPT Thomas W. Jaeger

Infantry Officer Advanced Course 6-72

Roster No. 084, Faculty Advisor Group 9

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. Overview. Since the start of the Vietnam War, the American prisoner of war has received cruel and unjust treatment from both the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese. The United States has made many attempts to force these two governments to treat their captives humanely, with little result.

B. Scope. The period from the start of the war in Vietnam until present is the concern of this monograph. I shall make an analysis of both the physical and mental treatment the American prisoner of war has undergone in the hands of the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese.

C. Objectives. I will compare the treatment received by the American prisoner of war under Viet Cong control versus North Vietnamese control in order to determine under which environment the American prisoner of war has the greatest chance of survival and psychological adjustment to the ordeals of internment.

D. Method of Development. I will conduct this study in a spatial pattern.

II. BODY

A. In August 1964, LT Everett Alvarez, Jr., US Navy, was shot down while flying over North Vietnam and captured. LT Alvarez is still a prisoner of war in North Vietnam along with many others. In July 1972 the United States had 393 American fighting men known imprisoned in North Vietnam, 97 in Viet Cong prison camps and five in Laos. An additional 1,228 were being carried as missing in action. Since then that figure has risen due to the increase in bombing of North Vietnam. Some of the men like LT Alvarez have been in captivity for over 4 years. The physical and mental conditions of these men is unknown due to the refusal on the part of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese to allow anyone from the United States or the American Red Cross to inspect all prison camps. (8:11) The North Vietnam government asceded to the Geneva Convention on 14 November 1953. The Viet Cong (N.L.F.) refuses to recognize the Geneva Convention on the grounds that it "was not a part to the deliberation that led to their formation." Reports from prisoners who have escaped

or been released from Viet Cong and North Vietnamese prison camps show that neither party is living up to the conditions established by the Geneva Convention in reference to basic and humane treatment of prisoners of war. Hanoi has stated that participation by the United States in the war is "illegal" and our attacks on North Vietnam by US bombers are "criminal"; therefore, the men they hold in their prisons cannot be considered prisoners of war. (4-40) William H. Sullivan, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, told a House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee in November 1969 that "one of the motivations the North Vietnamese have is political, an effort to use the understandable sympathy and concern and worry in this country about these men in a way that will bring pressure to bear on the administration with respect to actual conduct of military and diplomatic negotiations."

B. Physical Conditions.

1. While a captive under Viet Cong control the prisoner is normally confined in a straw or mud *HOOCHE* arranged in a semicircle around a guard post. Normally there are an average of five prisoners in the camp at one time. The hooches have bars over the windows made of a sampan-type wood which is common to the area. The prisoner is responsible for keeping his cell clean and in a good state of repair. During his last year in confinement MAJ James N. Rowe was allowed to borrow an axe from the guards and build chairs, a table, and a bed. He was also allowed to leave his cage to hunt and fish for food to supplement his daily rations of rice. During his confinement he was moved to a different camp several times due to US military forces in the area. This gave him the opportunity to become more familiar with his surroundings and have some hope of escape. (2-250) Of the seven persons that were captured with Major Rowe, three died of malnutrition and one, CPT Humbert R. Versace, was executed in September 1965. We presently know of 17 Americans who have died in captivity under the Viet Cong. There are well documented cases in which Americans have been captured by the Viet Cong and their bodies found later with the marks of torture evident upon them. Usually their hands had been tied behind them and shot at close range. There are some cases in which they had been pinned to the ground with bamboo stakes. (11:45) On 26 September 1965 the Viet Cong announced the execution of two American prisoners as reprisals for the execution of Viet Cong terrorists by the South Vietnamese authorities. (5:25) Normally attempts by the prisoners to communicate earned beatings from the guards. The main concern of the prisoner was dying from wounds received and malnutrition. The Viet Cong have very few medical facilities, were poorly trained in treatment of wounds and disease and doctors were scarce to non-existent. PFC Coy Tinsley stated that when he was captured on 9 March 1969 he had been wounded and had several bones broken in his shoulder.

The Viet Cong had operated on him with a rusty scissors without anesthesia to remove the schrapnel. (3:10) Many of the prisoners during captivity had beri beri, hepatitis, yellow jaundice, dysentery or intestinal parasites. Three of the men captured with Major Rowe died from malnutrition, not because they were starved, but because they did not force themselves to eat the monotonous diet of rice and fish.

2. Although the physical conditions the prisoner is exposed to under North Vietnamese control is similar to that of the Viet Cong, it differed in many respects. The American flyer shot down has less reason to worry of immediate execution in that the North Vietnamese have more sophisticated facilities for handling prisoners and consider the American prisoner as a political tool in negotiations with the United States on ending the war. The prisoner is often paraded through the towns and villages on the way to Hanoi with men, women, and children spitting in his face, hitting him with sticks, and young children smashing him in the face with rocks. (11:31)

The cells in the North Vietnamese camps are much better constructed than the ones used by the Viet Cong. These are constructed of concrete with a heavy steel door and bars on the two windows in the cell. The double cells are lighted with a single lightbulb and a curtain that appeared to be a shower stall was in the back corner. The solitary confinement cells have no lights or windows and are very small. Unlike the Viet Cong cells the surroundings were very cold, hard, and allowed no hope of escape. The buildings within the compound were surrounded by a 12-foot wall, with armed guards in towers spaced throughout the compound. At the time of the raid on Son Tay the North Vietnamese released a photo of Americans playing basketball in the compound. I saw no recreational facilities anywhere in the compound at Son Tay. The cells I have just described were contained in the one building my element searched and appeared to have been freshly reconstructed with sacks of concrete still stored in one of the cells. The other element reported the remaining buildings to be in a very poor state of maintenance. (Personal Experience)

Of the prisoners of war that have been released by North Vietnam, all had spent long periods of time in solitary confinement. (7-8) LT Robert Frishman, US Navy, told of how he had been beaten by the guards and his wounds left untreated. He was held in solitary confinement until he began talking to the rats. At one time he was forced to sit on a narrow stool without moving for 4 days until his legs bloated and he lost consciousness and fell off. He also stated he had been dragged along the ground through the streets

of Hanoi with a broken leg. Often prisoners were deprived of food or sleep for long periods of time. LT Frishman had been shot in the arm when shot down and received poor medical treatment by his captors. They later operated and removed part of his elbow. I talked to LT Frishman in San Diego, California 6 months after he was released. He appeared very thin and still had no use of his right arm. (Personal Interview)

The prisoner of war in North Vietnam is allowed little opportunity to go outside his cell. He is not allowed to hunt or fish to supplement his diet. Once in a while he is allowed outside his cell for one half hour to sun himself and sometimes is allowed to wash his clothes in a wash house within the courtyard. (7-9)

The majority of the prisoners of war have lost between 10 and 50 or more pounds between their capture and release. Although only a prisoner 22 months, LT Frishman lost 55 pounds. (7-9)

C. Mental Conditions.

1. Under Viet Cong control the prisoner of war is constantly concerned with disease and malnutrition because of the food and filthy environment. He must have a strong will to survive. It took MAJ Rowe 2 years to get used to eating rice by forcing himself to eat. The Viet Cong, however, are concerned with keeping the American alive and have orders from Hanoi to do so. They are considered very valuable as a propaganda commodity. The prisoner is told that he is a political criminal taken in an undeclared war and that he is totally subject to the enemy's laws. He is told that, therefore, they can do anything they want with him, including killing him, and that anything done for him is a result of "lenient" policy. (6:6)

Political indoctrination is constant, intense, and sophisticated with literature and lectures pitched at producing repentant "peace soldiers" for the domestic antiwar movement in the United States. The entire system depended upon isolating the prisoner and convincing him that he is utterly alone and helpless, totally at the mercy of his captors, and far beyond the protection of his own government. Not allowed to send or receive mail he is fearful that his country is unaware of his captivity and that he will be forgotten. (2:210)

The prisoner is allowed to do work during the day and, in Major Rowe's case, to hunt, fish, and raise animals. This takes much of the monotony and boredom out of captivity and is a tremendous psychological factor.

There are no barbed wire fences or guard towers in most Viet Cong camps. The prisoner could always maintain some element of hope for escape. (6:5)

2. In the North Vietnamese camp the prisoners of war are not allowed to do any form of work. They eat, sleep, and bathe in their own cells. A schedule is adopted in the camp where the prisoners eat at the same time every day, wash on certain days, and maintain an unwaivering routine. This becomes very monotonous and the prisoner is bored. The thing he misses most is communication. The only opportunity he has to talk to another person is during interrogation and indoctrination sessions. (11:31)

His fear of death by his captors is minimal because he is aware of the propaganda and political value he has to the North Vietnamese.

The prisoner of war in North Vietnam has almost no means of escape due to the construction of his cell and security procedures within the camp. Even if he did escape he would have little chance of returning to friendly control due to the great distance to any friendly area. The prisoner of war is aware that his only chance to return to his family is through release by his captives or rescue by an American raid force, as in Son Tay.

The East German film agency "Deutsche Film Agentur" has offered US television networks several hours of film of captured Americans for \$500,000. In most of the films the same prisoners are seen paraded through the streets of Hanoi, behind bars in solitary, playing table tennis, and carrying plates with a suspiciously large portion of food heaped on them. Although the Geneva Convention prohibits coercion, there have been examples of Americans being put through their paces at so called news conferences. Observers have referred to these as "frightening experiences" and have indicated that the pilots were obviously under the influence of drugs, hypnosis, or some other external control. (7:24) The North Vietnamese government may attempt to show the American prisoner of war is being treated in accordance with the Geneva Convention but many reports received from Americans released from captivity indicate otherwise. (11:30)

III. ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

The Viet Cong captor has at times been shown to be very brutal in the treatment of our American prisoners of war. He has executed some and allowed others to die of their wounds and disease. He has also been lenient in releasing some whom they thought would die if not released. His medical treatment to the prisoner of war has been deficient if for no reason but inadequate medical facilities and personnel. He has maintained a

policy of trying to keep the prisoner of war alive for his own propaganda goals. He has attempted to indoctrinate his captive to his way of thinking and make the American think he was the guilty party. However, this is a basic communist doctrine and is expected. He has allowed his captives to maintain a sane state of mind by allowing him to work, supplement his diet by fishing and hunting, and has given him an environment in which there was some hope of escape.

The North Vietnamese has cared for its wounded and sick prisoners of war, also for its own political goals. He has given his captive sufficient food and medical aid in order to stay alive, but has not given any means for him to supplement this diet. He has been extremely cruel and inhumane by dragging his prisoner through the main streets of Hanoi, putting him in solitary confinement for long periods of time, tortured and executed some, and used them as pawns in his negotiations at the peace table. North Vietnam has held men captive longer than any previous wars the United States has been involved in. It has built such a defensive fortress around the prison camps that it is virtually impossible for any prisoner of war to escape or be rescued. All this has created a tremendous psychological factor in the American prisoner of war to the point where he has a sense of futility. The prisoner has such monotonous, boring and dreary surroundings that he wonders whether he will ever be released or see his family again. Although the North Vietnam government has the capability and resources to provide the prisoner of war fair and humane treatment in accordance with the conditions of the Geneva Convention of which they had signed, they have not.

IV. EFFECTS OR IMPLICATIONS

The Viet Cong, although often led or directed by North Vietnamese cadre, are less sophisticated than the North Vietnamese. They have less control and guidance by higher headquarters than North Vietnam. Therefore, in many cases they tend to develop their own policy and procedure for handling the prisoner of war. They tend to be more reactionary as in the cases of the executions of prisoners in reprisal for action taken by their enemy. They also tend to be more lenient in handling the prisoner by allowing him to work outside his cell, supplement his diet by fishing and hunting, and even the raising of animals. This gives the prisoner a purpose, allows him to express creativity, and avoids the monotony and boredom associated with being a prisoner. Due to the lack of resources, the Viet Cong must make do with what he has available, to include the materials for construction of a cell. The cell in the Viet Cong

prisoner of war camp is made of material substance such as wood, straw, and the like. This is not the hard, cold, grim surroundings the prisoner feels in the North Vietnamese camps. The prisoner of war under the Viet Cong has some hope of escape due to the numerous times he may be required to move, and the mistakes made by lesser trained guards. There have been numerous Americans that have escaped from the Viet Cong yet none from North Vietnam.

The prisoner of war in North Vietnam has little or no hope of ever escaping from captivity. Due to the increased security against invasion around the camps in Hanoi after the Son Tay rescue attempt, a further attempt would be almost impossible. A second attempt would have little chance for success and it is highly improbable that one will be made. This increases the futility of the prisoner's hope for escape. The chance of dying or being executed at the present time is minimal due to the North Vietnamese policy to use the prisoners for political goals. After being inside the cells at Son Tay and seeing the conditions the prisoner of war is exposed to year after year I feel the strongest psychological factor is the sense of loneliness, hopelessness, and futility of effort. The prisoner of war has nothing but concrete, steel, filth and harsh voices month after month, year after year. In the South the prisoner has hope for escape. In the North he has none. The prisoner of war is better off psychologically and mentally in the hands of the Viet Cong than in the hands of a government that does not have a sense of humanity.

Thomas W. Jaeger
THOMAS W. JAEGER
Captain, Infantry
544-3090

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