



The Battle Behind Bars

Navy and Marine POWs in the Vietnam War



Stuart I. Rochester



capture in February 1965, was

THE U.S. NAVY AND THE VIETNAM WAR

Edward J. Marolda and Sandra J. Doyle, *Series Editors*

The Battle Behind Bars

Navy and Marine POWs in the Vietnam War

Stuart I. Rochester



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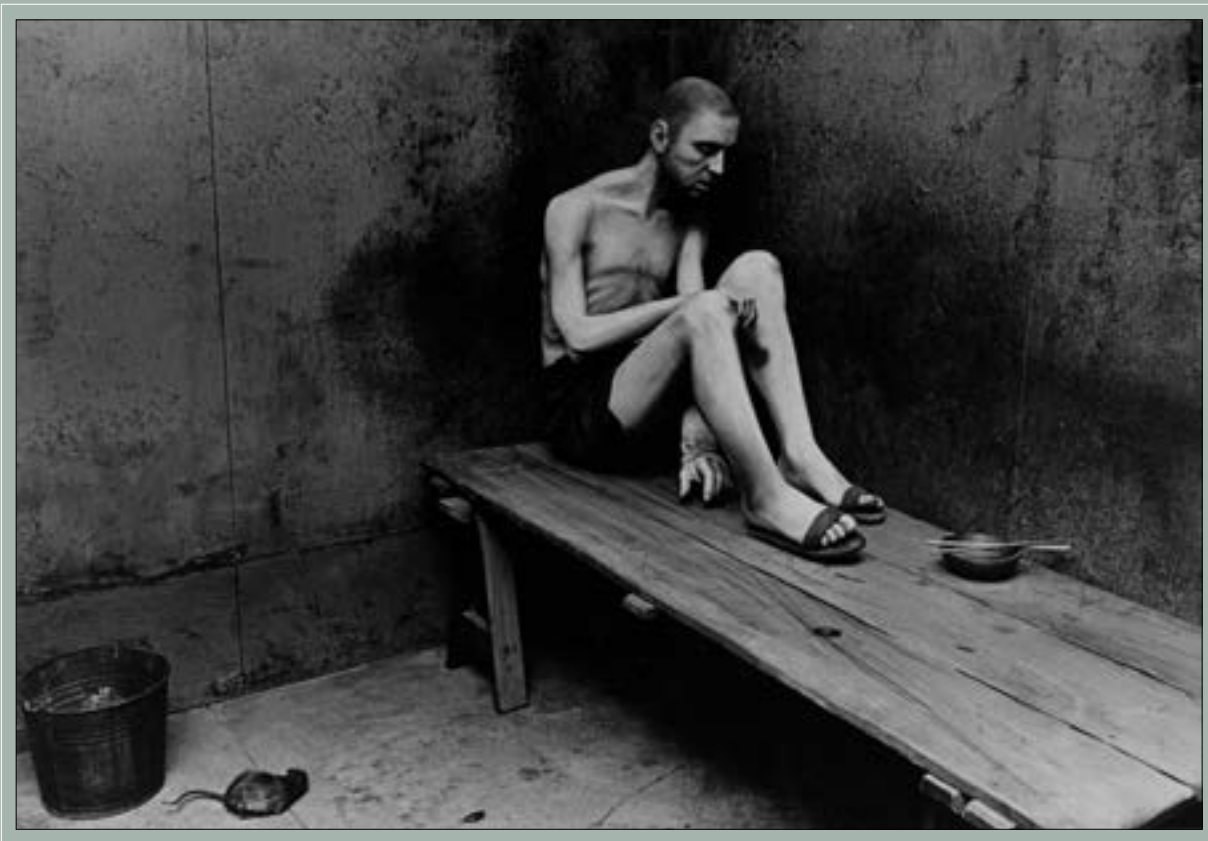
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This image, part of a Pentagon corridor exhibit during the Vietnam War, depicts the environment of a typical Hanoi prison cell.

PROLOGUE

It was fitting that the senior officer aboard the first plane to land at Clark Air Base in the Philippines following the release of the American prisoners of war from Hanoi in 1973 was a naval officer. When a thin, wan Captain Jeremiah Denton descended the ramp to a bank of microphones and uttered the poignant words, “We are honored to have had the opportunity to serve our country under difficult circumstances,” he spoke for the entire body of comrades who over the past decade had endured the longest wartime captivity of any group of U.S. prisoners in the nation’s history. But no servicemen suffered through a longer, rougher captivity, or played a more prominent role in the leadership and life of the American-occupied prison camps in Southeast Asia, than the veteran Navy and Marine POWs among the Operation Homecoming returnees. They comprised a high percentage of the early captures, dominated the ranks of the early seniors, and contributed vitally by deed and by example to the high standard of conduct and resistance that so distinguished the POWs of the Vietnam War.

All told, the nearly six hundred U.S. prisoners, including 25 civilians, repatriated between February and April 1973 during Operation Homecoming included 138 Navy and 26 Marine Corps personnel. Additionally, another seven Navy POWs had either escaped (two) or been released (five) earlier, and nine died in captivity. Captured Marines besides the Homecoming contingent included nine who died while incarcerated, ten who escaped, two who were released prior to 1973, and one who was returned in 1979. Although only a fraction of the services’ POW totals of previous wars, they, along with captured members of the other services, had an influence and significance disproportionate to their small numbers, owing to their being at the center of a war (waged in large part by propaganda and political persuasion) in which prisoners were key pawns and bargaining chips.

The Marine captives fell primarily into two categories: aviators shot down over North Vietnam and held in permanent detention facilities in and around Hanoi; and younger enlistees and NCOs (noncommissioned officers), along with a handful of officers, seized by Viet Cong or North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troops in ground action in South Vietnam. The latter group was moved between makeshift camps mostly in the northern provinces of the South before joining the first group in the North. Because of the disparity in age and rank and related factors of training and discipline, as well as separate geographical locations and circumstances of confinement, the POW experiences of the two groups were distinct. Neither had an easy road, but each encountered advantages and disadvantages relative to their situation that improved or complicated their lot.

By contrast, captured Navy personnel were a homogeneous group who for the most part came from similar backgrounds and, allowing for differences in dates and duration of captivity, shared a similar experience in prison. Of the 138 men Navy analysts examined at Homecoming, all were officers and aviators, the majority college-educated, with an average age of 31 at time of capture and five years on average spent in confinement between 1964 and 1973. All were captured and held in North Vietnam following shootdowns or accidents that required them to ditch their planes in the North. Notable exceptions among those returned to U.S. control earlier were two pilots, Lieutenant Charles Klusmann and Lieutenant (jg) Dieter Dengler, who went down in and subsequently escaped from Laos, and Seaman Douglas Hegdahl, who joined his aviator comrades in the Hanoi prison system after falling from his ship in the Gulf of Tonkin.

The unconventional nature of the war and the unforgiving environment of Southeast Asia inflicted special hardships on the Vietnam-era POWs, whether they spent their captivity in the

jungles of the South or the jails of the North. All were affected by the extremes of a monsoonal climate that brought misery to captor and captive alike. Oppressively hot and humid summers that turned cells into ovens alternated with bone-chilling winters, the cold made worse by lack of adequate clothing and blankets. The absence of edible food, potable water, and medicine in POW encampments in the South, and their chronic scarcity in the North, caused widespread hunger, malnutrition, and disease. Compounding the harsh elements were challenges peculiar to an undeclared war that left American prisoners in a legal limbo. Characterizing the fallen aviators and captured ground personnel as “air pirates” and mercenaries, the enemy denied them the protection of the Geneva wartime conventions and at one point threatened to put the prisoners on trial for war crimes.

Downed pilots suffered serious injuries—burns, wrenched sockets, broken vertebrae—from both high-speed ejections and low-level bailouts that resulted in hard parachute landings on often rough terrain. Dr. Richard Wilbur, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health and Environment during the 1973 repatriation, estimated that nearly one-third of the returning Navy and Air Force pilots entered captivity with major fractures. Wounds and injuries typically went untreated, sometimes at the prisoner’s insistence. The men often worried less about infection and discomfort than permanent disability from botched surgery or unnecessary amputation. Marine prisoners in the South, stuffed into bamboo cages lacking shelter or even primitive sanitation, fell victim to malaria, pneumonia, and all manner of parasitical and intestinal illnesses. The deficient diet and nonexistent hygiene of an itinerant captivity left them susceptible to excruciating, sometimes fatal bouts of dysentery and beriberi.



Senior POW leaders in Hanoi, Navy Commanders James B. Stockdale, left, and Jeremiah A. Denton Jr.

DPMO Files

The brutal conditions were matched by abusive handling—systematic torture in the North, exhausting marches and cruel neglect in the South, and the danger of outright execution for the unfortunate few held in Laos. Even during periods of relaxed treatment, prisoners confronted crippling anxiety and depression over their uncertain fate; as the captivity lengthened, mental deterioration became as grave a threat to survival as physical deprivation. The horrors of captivity in Southeast Asia may have been surpassed by atrocities committed by the Communist captors in Korea, but the period of incarceration in Korea was much shorter and the episodes of severe punishment and suffering not as recurrent. Marine Chief Warrant Officer John Frederick survived repeated torture and years of health problems before succumbing to typhoid in the summer of 1972, just months before the POWs were freed. The sheer length of captivity in so hostile an environment—Frederick was well into his seventh year in prison when he died—introduced risks and perils that gave an extra dimension to suffering in Vietnam unknown in Korea for all its own particular abominations.

Almost from the moment of capture, U.S. POWs of the Vietnam War faced major challenges and profound adjustments. Navy pilot Lieutenant Commander Robert Doremus remembered the trauma of his initial confinement in a squalid cell

in Hanoi, which contrasted sharply with the spit-and-polish gleam of the quarters he had occupied hours before on board his carrier. "The quick change from a field grade officer to pajama clad captive, from clean sheeted foam rubber pillowed bed . . . to cement bed complete with foot stocks" had an Alice-into-the-rabbit-hole suddenness. Navy prisoners as a group might have been expected to adjust more readily than their Air Force or Army comrades to their sharply circumscribed existence, having been accustomed to cramped conditions on board ships. But there was no prior experience to prepare one for the loss of toothbrushes, hot water, and other essentials to perform simple ablutions; the nightly invasion of foraging rodents and mosquitoes; the stench from fetid waste buckets and soiled clothes; and the extended stays in solitary. At length they would devise substitute clocks and calendars to track time, exercises to stay fit, techniques to relieve toothaches and mask odors, and strategies to cope with numbing routine and malaise. Marine Major Howard Dunn commented after the war that in terms of education, maturity, and survival skills, the officer-aviators who dominated the POW rolls in Vietnam were "vastly superior to any group of prisoners in any previous conflict in which the United States has engaged." Yet much more than proficiency and training, their adaptation would depend on qualities of resiliency and faith, for which rank or résumé were no guarantor of success.

In the end, the Navy and Marine Corps could point with pride to the performance of the great majority of their prisoners of war but also had to acknowledge instances of weakness, misconduct, and outright collaboration with the enemy by a few men. As Medal of Honor recipient Captain (later Vice Admiral) James Stockdale noted, the elemental tests posed by captivity in Southeast Asia brought out "the very best and the very worst" in individuals. As much as they relied on the cohesiveness, support, and inspiration of their fellow inmates, their experience under such mental and physical duress ultimately became intensely personal. It was indicative of how often inexplicable and divergent were the paths taken to negotiate what one prisoner called

the "sojourn through hell" that the same services which produced some of the most esteemed POW leaders and most remarkable profiles in courage also produced some of the most conspicuous failures and slackers. The journey that ended with Denton's words on the tarmac at Clark brought some of the prisoners home to hard-won honor and tributes and others to new trials. For all of them, their tenure as POWs would be a defining chapter in their lives, just as their homecoming would be a singular moment in the life of the nation that celebrated their return. ♪



Panhandles of North Vietnam and Laos.

A CHRONICLE OF THE CAPTIVITY

Although the enemy captured or held American prisoners in Cambodia during the Vietnam War, and two U.S. POWs (including Navy Lieutenant Commander Robert Flynn) went down over Communist China and spent their captivity there, for the most part the American POWs were taken prisoner in North Vietnam, South Vietnam, or Laos. Beginning with Laos, it is helpful at the outset of this history to reconstruct the nature and sequence of the captivity in the respective theaters.

Laos: The Shadow War

At the start of the 1960s, in Washington's view the greater concern, and the focus of the U.S. anti-Communist effort in Southeast Asia, was not Vietnam but Laos, and it was there that the first American—and U.S. Navy—POWs of the Indochina conflict fell into enemy hands. Though the Kennedy administration was intent on restricting U.S. forces in Laos to an advisory and reconnaissance role, contact with the enemy, as in Vietnam, became inevitable as the U.S. involvement expanded and intensified. By the spring of 1961, a half-dozen Americans had already been captured by pro-Communist Laotian rebels (Pathet Lao), including Navy Seaman John McMorrow, a mechanic on board a U.S. helicopter that crashed while ferrying a squad of Royal Lao government troops. Over the course of the decade, only a handful of Navy and Marine personnel followed McMorrow into Laotian captivity, but among those were two of the more riveting survival and escape stories of the war.

Ringed with sharp karst ridges and plunging valleys, Laos is more desolate and isolated than Vietnam. Even more so than the Vietnamese, its primitive people had little understanding of or respect for international conventions. The backward country acquired a special notoriety for prisoners of war held there, who went by their own

nickname, “Lulus,” for “Legendary Union of Laotian Unfortunates.” As bad as captivity was under the Communists in Vietnam, Americans taken captive by the Pathet Lao often fared worse, to the point that U.S. pilots typically elected to avoid going down in Laos even it meant nursing a crippled aircraft into North Vietnam. As Navy Lieutenant George Coker, a North Vietnamese-held POW with knowledge of Laos, testified after the war: “Even if you are healthy in the chute, when you finally land you’ve got to penetrate those trees . . . and then you’ve got to fight that karst . . . That stuff can be so sheer that . . . it will actually peel you like a grater.” Even if you managed to land safely, Coker noted, the trackless expanse, “the thing that gave you protection from the enemy,” became the enemy itself because of the scarcity of easily obtainable food or water and the absence of friend or foe to dispense even minimal first aid. Seaman McMorrow was lucky to be released with others in his group after a 15-month detention in remote mountain and jungle stockades where an ailing U.S. Army captain was shot to death when he became a burden to his captors. Only a timely cease-fire among rival guerrilla factions and negotiations involving an International Red Cross representative saved the McMorrow group.

The first Navy pilot captured in the Vietnam War was Lieutenant Charles Klusmann, seized in Laos on 6 June 1964 when enemy ground fire hit his RF-8 reconnaissance plane. He was forced to eject over the Plain of Jars not far from the area he was photographing. Frequent moves, the onset of debilitating dysentery, and the lack of comradeship to sustain him, he being the only American in camp, weakened the aviator's resolve. His captors pressured him to put in writing that he received “good treatment.” Upon recovering strength, Klusmann escaped with a Laotian companion familiar with the region who guided him over backwoods trails to friendly forces. The prisoner's detailed report of his three-month incarceration underscored the



NH KNS895

Lieutenant Charles Klusmann with Vice Admiral Roy L. Johnson, Commander Seventh Fleet, in August 1964 after Klusmann's escape from captivity in Laos.

vulnerability of an isolated individual under pressure of interrogation and had a significant influence on subsequent Navy POW training (see "Resistance," p. 23).

One of those who may have benefited from Klusmann's experience was a second Navy pilot seized in Laos who also managed to escape. Navy Lieutenant (jg) Dieter Dengler crashlanded his A-1 Skyraider near Laos's Mu Gia Pass on 1 February 1966. According to a lengthy debriefing and later published memoir, he survived severe punishment, terrible illness, and near-starvation. After he broke away from guards, a passing A-1 pilot miraculously spotted him barely conscious on the morning of 20 July, and a helicopter lifted him out. Dengler's

account, which traced his 23 days on the run from pursuers, could never be fully corroborated and contained inconsistencies that may have stemmed in part from malaria-induced hallucinations. But the confirmed beheading of an Air Force lieutenant who attempted escape with him was graphic enough testimony to the undeniable dangers he and other POWs faced in Laos.

As Vietnam overtook Laos in importance after 1963, the list of U.S. casualties, and captives, there began to swell, while the number of American prisoners in Laos remained small and scattered. The only Marine known to be captured in Laos was Corporal Frank Cius, a gunner aboard a helicopter brought down by enemy fire near Laos's border with South Vietnam in June 1967. Cius and Navy Lieutenant (jg) James Bedinger, the latter shot down over Laos in November 1969, were moved north to link up with other U.S. prisoners in Hanoi. Bedinger became a principal cog in the POW communications network in the main prison compound at Hoa Lo. A top senior officer at Hoa Lo, Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Robinson Risner, called the spirited redhead "a ball of fire" for his daily publication of a cellblock "newsletter" on strips of toilet paper.

The air strikes that continued over Laos through the decade in fact claimed scores of U.S. aviators but produced few known POWs. On the one hand, a relatively high percentage of downed fliers who managed to avoid the karst and heavy tree cover were rescued on the ground in Laos. Unlike in North Vietnam, Laos's sparse population and proximity to search and rescue teams operating out of U.S. airfields in South Vietnam and Thailand offered good odds on recovering pilots who survived their shootdowns. On the other hand, among those who were not rescued, most disappeared, their fate remaining a mystery in many instances, owing to the dearth of official contacts with the Pathet Lao and the likelihood that many who were seen safely ejecting from their planes died upon impact on the treacherous ridges or strung up in the thick jungle canopy where—even if alive initially and able to reach the ground—they were unable to obtain sustenance or treatment for the reasons described



A bamboo cage in which American prisoners in South Vietnam were kept.

by Coker. Between Dengler's escape in 1966 and the 1973 repatriation, no American POW returned from Laos, so there was an information vacuum on the fate of those captured there. Had Klusmann and Dengler not fled to freedom after short captivities, they might well have perished in Laos's shadows themselves. Of some three hundred U.S. personnel listed as missing in action over Laos, only nine turned up on the capture rolls among those released during Operation Homecoming, including Bedinger and Cius. The rest presumably fell victim to either the rugged Laotian wilderness or atrocities committed by villagers or enemy soldiers.

South Vietnam: Marine POWs in a Fight for Survival

Beginning in 1965, U.S. troop strength in South Vietnam grew exponentially from about 25,000

at the start of that year to approximately 180,000 in December and almost a half-million by the end of 1967. The steady Americanization of the war exposed both U.S. military and civilian personnel in South Vietnam to increased dangers, including the risk of capture. The number of captured did not match the lengthening list of Navy and Air Force pilots apprehended in the North but was significant nonetheless, far exceeding the number of Americans seized in Laos. By the end of 1967, the number of U.S. POWs seized in the South had climbed to 100, the count then doubling early in 1968 as a result of the enemy's Tet offensive. After Tet, the rate of increase dropped sharply for the remainder of the war, the total eventually reaching 250. Some three dozen Marines, three-quarters of the service's POW total for all of Southeast Asia, were among them.

Prisoners held in the South—besides Marines, mostly soldiers and civilians—faced tests that more

closely resembled the conditions in Laos than in North Vietnam. Those in the custody of Viet Cong guerrillas were hauled long distances between VC hideouts in deteriorating condition. They encountered less regimented discipline and fewer episodes of planned, programmed torture but a more chaotic, brutish daily existence than that experienced by U.S. aviators confined in Hanoi. Their relative youth, thinner leadership, and greater isolation, with fewer comrades with whom to organize resistance or share information and relieve anxiety, placed them at a comparative disadvantage. Additionally, housed in bamboo cages and thatched huts rather than concrete cellblocks, they were more at the mercy of the elements than their compatriots in the North. The latter suffered terribly themselves from the extremes of hot and cold weather, but their shelter at least afforded some protection from blistering sun and monsoonal rains. Other dangers in the South included leeches, poisonous snakes, guards with short tempers and hair-trigger nerves from hunger and fatigue, and “friendly fire” from U.S. and allied forces targeting VC locations.

Throughout the Vietnam conflict, one in five Americans taken prisoner by the Viet Cong or NVA in the South could expect to die in captivity, as compared with one in twenty seized in the North. The mortality record among those captured in the South would have been higher yet but for the fact that some managed to escape, capitalizing on the one notable advantage that accrued to prisoners there: the same lack of sheltering walls that left them exceedingly vulnerable to the external environment removed a principal barrier to breaking out and slipping away. The proximity to friendly forces also helped escapees. Including several individuals who were in custody less than 48 hours, about two dozen American POWs escaped from Viet Cong or NVA captivity in the South. Though not a large number, that was still two dozen more than escaped from North Vietnam, and over 10 percent of the total number seized in the South. Most of those who were successful—including Marine Major Richard Risner; Sergeants James Dodson, Frank Iodice, and Albert Potter; Corporals Walter Eckes, Steven Nelson,

and William Tallaferro; and Privates Joseph North, Walter Hamilton, and Michael Roha—accomplished their getaways within days or weeks of their capture while they still had the strength.

Major Risner was one of the few Marine officers seized by the Viet Cong in the South. The first was Captain Donald Cook, whose raw courage and determined resistance earned him the Medal of Honor. Lieutenant William Grammar never had a chance to prove his mettle, suffering a horrific death shortly after his capture northeast of Quang Tri in May 1967 when Viet Cong attackers executed him and Army Sergeant Orville Frits apparently following their torture. More fortunate were Army Captains Paul Montague and Bruce Archer, seized in March 1968 when their helicopter was shot down southwest of their base at Phu Bai, and Marine 1st Lieutenant James DiBernardo, taken by the VC, along with Corporal John Deering, when their Armed Forces TV station in Hue fell during Tet. Montague, Archer, and DiBernardo were marched north with other Tet captures, an arduous trip barefoot through mud and over rocks. They arrived inside North Vietnam at a place the Americans called variously Bao Cao (Vietnamese for “please” or “may I”) or, owing to the shape of its cellblock windows, “Portholes.” Although crude by any normal standard, the accommodations were better than those along the trail or in the open jungle. By the end of 1968, when they were hauled further north to join the POWs in Hanoi, they were on the road to relative safety if not comfort. The three officers made it home in 1973 with two other Marine officers briefly held prisoner in the South late in the war, Captain James Walsh and Lieutenant Alan Kroboth.

Most of the Marines captured in the South were apprehended either in the vicinity of Danang, the military hub of the U.S. deployment in northern South Vietnam, or on the northern frontier around Hue and Khe Sanh, where the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese launched their ferocious Tet assault and netted scores of fresh POWs. Barring escape or quick transfer across the DMZ to the less precarious confines of Bao Cao, incarceration in this

Marine Captain Donald Cook

CAPTAIN DONALD G. COOK became the first U.S. Marine POW in the Vietnam War when, on 31 December 1964, he was wounded and captured in a battle near Binh Gia while accompanying an Army of Vietnam (ARVN) battalion that was overrun by Viet Cong. From the outset, Cook took a hard-line stance, refusing to cooperate or even respond to the enemy's commands. Moved northwest to a series of camps along the Cambodian border that served as a VC sanctuary until B-52 strikes pounded the area, then back east over some of the roughest terrain in the South, Cook contracted malaria, which made the 200-mile trek excruciating. Douglas Ramsey, a U.S. foreign service officer imprisoned with Cook, and Army POWs present in camps along the way later attested to his bravery and indomitable will. According to one, Cook was so hard-nosed, "I believe he would have stopped shitting if he had thought 'Charlie' was using it for fertilizer. . . . If you don't count eating, Cook was being one hundred percent uncooperative, to the point he wouldn't tell them his symptoms when he wasn't feeling well. They wanted him to write them down, but he'd refuse to write anything since his capture, even his name."

Cook paid dearly for his intransigence, receiving less food than the others and spending more time in solitary. Still, he shared what rations he had with his fellow prisoners, helped nurse the sick, and led by example even as his own health deteriorated. Seeking cover from unrelenting allied bombardment, the captors holed up for a year in a miserable low-lying campsite that flooded during the monsoon season. With even rice in short supply, Cook became gravely ill with anemia and dysentery, along with the worsening malaria. When the group pulled up stakes late in 1967 and headed back toward the Cambodian border and the drier highlands, Cook's body finally gave out and he died en route.

For years Cook's heroism was little known outside the tiny band of POWs with him in that region of South Vietnam. When Ramsey returned at Homecoming, he sent a letter to the Marine Corps Commandant, General Robert E. Cushman Jr., detailing Cook's strict



USMC Division

Captain Donald Cook, the first U.S. Marine captured in Vietnam and the first and only Marine in history to receive the Medal of Honor for exemplary conduct while in captivity.



Medal of Honor

adherence to the Code of Conduct, selfless sacrifice, and extraordinary valor in the face of failing health. The Marine Corps drafted recommendations for a high honor for the gallant

officer while continuing to list him as missing in action and probably still a prisoner of war. With his name finally removed from the MIA list in February 1980, on 16 May of that year, at an impressive ceremony in the Pentagon's courtyard, Donald Cook's widow received her husband's Medal of Honor from Secretary of the Navy Edward Hidalgo. The Navy further recognized the Marine, who was promoted to colonel while in captivity, by naming a ship in his honor—the *Arleigh Burke*-class, Aegis guided missile destroyer USS *Donald Cook* (DDG 75). ⚓

region often amounted to a death sentence, as the combination of extreme privation and inhospitable geography over time placed even the fittest at risk. So severe were the living conditions at Tam Ky, a guerrilla complex south of Danang, that six of the 10 U.S. Marines held there between 1967 and 1970 never made it out. Army physician Captain Floyd Kushner, the only officer at the camp, recalled his helplessness as the victims, several of them still in their teens, died in his arms from the ravages of starvation and beriberi:

We were eating approximately three coffee cups of vermin-infested rice per day, with some fish sauce. We had a terrible skin disease that was keeping people up all night . . . [and] causing a lot of psychological anguish as well as physical anguish. We were horribly malnourished. People had malaria and dysentery, so that they were perhaps defecating many, many times a day, fifty or sixty times a day, could not make it to the latrine so that the prison yard was littered with human excrement. It was the rainy season. It was cold and miserable, and in general just a very horrible—I don't know the words that can describe how bad these times were.

The casualties included Marine Corporals Edwin Grissett, Robert Sherman, Dennis Hammond, Frederick Burns, and Joseph Zawtock and Private Earl Weatherman. Weatherman died attempting escape.

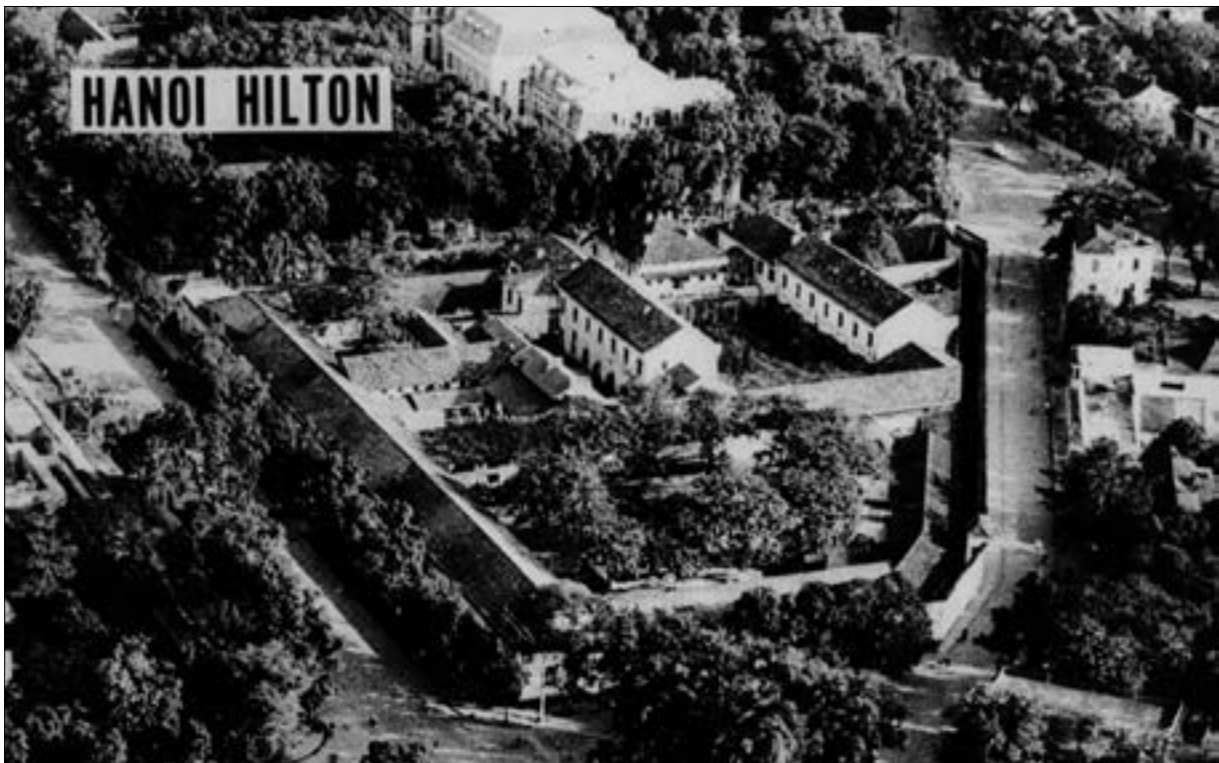
One of the few survivors of the Tam Ky ordeal was Private Robert Garwood who, upon his return to the United States in 1979, became the subject of the longest court-martial in Marine Corps history. Garwood's story was complicated and unusual, but not altogether unique. Garwood shared the fear, vulnerability, and confusion that gripped so many of the young captives at Tam Ky and elsewhere in the northern provinces of South Vietnam as they witnessed comrades fall like dominoes to the plague-like conditions. The men looked desperately for a way out, but they were handicapped by the

lack of psychological or survival training and the absence of organization and senior guidance but for Dr. Kushner. Between his capture in September 1965 and 1968, Garwood drifted steadily from collusion to defection, beginning with the making of propaganda tapes in exchange for preferred treatment and eventually wearing a Viet Cong uniform, interrogating and guarding his own countrymen, and, according to some reports, fighting alongside the VC. By 1969, not even his handlers knew quite what to make of him or do with him. He spent the next decade in relaxed but restive semi-confinement before getting a message to U.S. authorities that he was ready to return home. Before the war was out, three other young Marine POWs who had passed through one or more of the South's northern camps would be among a group of eight enlistees disparagingly referred to by fellow prisoners as the "Peace Committee" for their antiwar declarations and propaganda contributions to the enemy.

By April 1971, as the guerrilla stronghold in the Tam Ky region increasingly came under allied air attack, the enemy shepherded the surviving Marines and other remaining occupants of the Kushner camp north to Hanoi. The POWs arrived there at a time of much improved treatment so that the difference between the North and South captivities was even more pronounced. In Hanoi's cells they would encounter less freedom and more discipline (in part from the new demands of a functioning POW organization) than they had been accustomed to in the jungle, but they also had cleaner clothes, more palatable food, and an occasional bath. "After South Vietnam," one of the newcomers observed, "you couldn't put a price on things like these."

North Vietnam: The Plight of Captured Aviators

In the spring of 1965, coinciding with the introduction of American ground combat forces in the South, the U.S. involvement in Vietnam turned another key corner with President Lyndon Johnson's order to commence bombing operations in the North. The Navy's aerial activity in Southeast Asia



OSD History Collection

Hoa Lo, the “Hanoi Hilton,” was the main POW prison in downtown Hanoi. After 1970, the bulk of American prisoners were housed in the “Unity” compound, foreground, of the prison.

until then had been limited mostly to reconnaissance missions over Laos and one-time reprisal raids over North Vietnam such as those following the torpedo boat attack on the U.S. destroyer *Maddox* (DD 731) in the Gulf of Tonkin. During this operation, on 5 August 1964, Lieutenant (jg) Everett Alvarez Jr. was downed by antiaircraft fire and became the first naval aviator and the first American captured in North Vietnam. The more extensive bombing campaign launched in March 1965, under the code name Rolling Thunder, soon had the Navy and Air Force flying 1,500 attack sorties per month against the North. A steady stream of POWs joined Alvarez in Hanoi.

A week after his capture Alvarez was trucked from a countryside detention station into the capital and deposited at the municipal prison known as Hoa Lo, meaning “fiery furnace” in Vietnamese. Built by the French at the turn of the century, it was surrounded by thick concrete walls 15 to 20 feet



OSD History Collection

Lieutenant (jg) Everett Alvarez Jr., the first American aviator shot down and imprisoned in North Vietnam, spent eight and a half years in captivity.

high and occupied a trapezoidal city block. Officials divided the prison into several sections, which they later opened and reconfigured to house the POWs. Over the years, the POWs would name their respective compounds within the complex “Heartbreak Hotel,” “New Guy Village,” “Little Vegas,” and “Camp Unity.” The latter, by far the largest section,

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