SURVIVING THE HARD TIMES: THE STORY OF SURVIVAL AND RESISTANCE OF AMERICAN PRISONERS OF WAR IN KOREA AND VIETNAM

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CHAPTER I

WHAT MADE THE DIFFERENCE?

> Prisoners of War are soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, or civilians. As men of honor they represent an unfortunate group, victims of enemy capture, taken while fighting for their country. It must never be that they are stripped of their self-respect, their dignity or their inherent rights as human beings or as veterans of their country's combat forces.
>
> Raymond W. Murray, M.D., Medical Consultant,
> Veterans of Foreign Wars[1]

Resist giving information, endure torture, heal and resist some more. This was the command sent through the prison camps of North Vietnam by POW senior officers and obeyed by the vast majority of American POWs.[2] Americans captured in the Vietnam War while in captivity lived lives in sharp contrast to most of the prisoners of the Korean War just one decade earlier, for in the earlier war military structure was rare in the POW camps. The differences seem astounding. While they can be partially attributed to the establishment of the Code of Conduct after the Korean War, other factors also contributed to the different behaviors.

There are many differences in the prisoner experiences; however, a comparison of the wars yields several similarities. In both Korea and Vietnam American soldiers fought to contain communism in small and distant countries concerning which many Americans knew little. Korea and Vietnam were early experiments in the concept of

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[1] Stan Sommers, *The Korean Story, American Ex-Prisoners of War National Medical Research Committee*, 1981.

[2] Gerald Coffee, *Beyond Survival: Building on the Hard Times – A POW's Inspiring Story* (Aiea, HI: Coffee Enterprises Inc, 1990).

limited war. American military leaders in the theater of war faced operational restrictions imposed by Washington, and in both instances the goal was less than total victory. As each limited war reached its conclusion, a stalemate or a victory of sorts, the prisoners of war issue became an important aspect of the peace negotiations.

Three important aspects of the prisoner of war experience must be examined when evaluating the ability of American POWs to resist in Korea and Vietnam: the individual prisoner's physical condition, the POW community, and the nature of prisoner relationships. The experience for American servicemen captured in Korea was vastly different than for those captured in Vietnam. This thesis will examine the responses of both groups of prisoners to the intense interrogation, torture and communist indoctrination. The North Korean and Chinese militaries captured over 7,000 American servicemen and kept them in organized camps. A large number of these POWs collaborated with America's communist enemies. In contrast, the Vietnamese captured fewer American servicemen and those who were captured proved remarkably more resistant to interrogation and indoctrination.

Table 1: American POWs in Korea and Southeast Asia

American Prisoners or War	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Total
Korea[3]	6,656	40	231	263	7,190
Southeast Asia[4]	168	158	46	353	725
North[5] Vietnam	77	135	325	26	566

The number of collaborators in Korea becomes significant when comparing the stark numbers with collaborators in Vietnam. The following table provides an excellent illustration of the different prisoner responses.

[3] Harry Spiller, *American POWs in Korea: Sixteen Personal Accounts* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Company Inc., 1998), 1.

[4] Stuart Rochester and Frederick Kiley, *Honor Bound: American Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia 1961-1973* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1999), 600-620. American POWs were held in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

[5] Ibid., 587-589. Numbers based on prisoners returned during Operation Homecoming, 1973.

Table 2: Description of Behavior in Korean and North Vietnam POW camps

American Prisoners of War	Collaborators %	Middle Group %	Resisters %
Korea	15[6]	80[7]	5[8]
North Vietnam[9]	Less than 1	0	99

The physical condition of the prisoners impacted their ability to resist. Korean POWs were often forced to march through the countryside and mountains for weeks at a time. They suffered from battle injuries, disease, extreme weather and malnutrition. Korean POWs witnessed the death of large numbers of their fellow prisoners. Forty-three percent of Korean prisoners died in captivity.[10] Vietnam POWs suffered from malnutrition and many of the same diseases. Medical attention for injuries was sometimes available but rarely adequate. Regular and systematic torture, often resulting in serious injuries, added to the Vietnam POWs' problems. Although good health did

[6] David Polk, *Korean War: Ex- Prisoners of War* (Paduchah, KY: Turner Publishing, 1993) 73. This number is an estimate based on the number of prisoners believed to be "worthy of further study as possible collaborationists or perpetrators of some 'other misconduct.'" For other sources with numbers varying between 10-16 percent see "Why Did Many GI's Cave In?" *US News and World Report,* 25 February 1956; Department of the Army and George Washington University Human Resources Research Office, *Factors Related to the Collaboration and Resistance Behavior of U.S. Army PW's in Korea,* December, 1956, 48-52; Craig Howes, *Voices of the Vietnam POWs: Witness to Their Fight* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[7] "POW Experiences," (The Papers of General Mark Clark, The Museum and Archive of The Citadel, Charleston S.C.).

[8] Available sources fail to provide a specific number for the Resister population, however, based on the previous percentages 5% is a reasonable estimate.

[9] Rochester and Kiley, *Honor Bound,* 78, 210 and 568. These numbers are approximations based on the number of POWs who faced Court Martial or strong petitions for court-martials.

[10] Raymond B. Lech, *Broken Soldiers* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

not necessarily lead to resistance, prisoners in relatively fair health proved more capable of strong resistance. This paper will examine the relationship between physical condition and the ability to withstand communist indoctrination.

Also important to individual resistance was the prisoner's community. The experience for Korean POWs was one of communal living. Movements and communications were not strictly limited. Vietnam POWs had to overcome the difficulties of solitary confinement and strict rules against communicating with other prisoners. However, a strong community developed among Vietnam POWs as they drew upon their inner resources and developed bonds of friendship that were often stronger than they might have been in a communal situation. When strong interpersonal relationships developed in response to constant adversity those prisoners demonstrated a united front in their opposition to communist indoctrination. This paper will examine the different communities and discover whether a particular type of environment encouraged resistance or facilitated collaboration.

A third factor in the ability to resist was the composition of the POW community and the development of a chain of command. The vast majority of servicemen captured during the Korean War were enlisted men. The small number of Air Force and Navy officers captured in Korea were isolated and provided special attention by their captors. In contrast, the majority of POWs captured and held in Vietnamese camps were Navy and Air Force pilots. Only 80 of the Vietnam POWs were enlisted, and 24 were not pilots.[11] The average Vietnam POW was also college educated, and significantly older

[11] Rochester and Kileyz, x.

than the average Korean POW.[12] The Code of Conduct, the standard instructions for American servicemen in captivity, was first published after the Korean War, and was based on lessons learned from the Korean Ware POW experience. The Code mandated continued military order and the development of a POW chain of command. The chain of command proved a tremendous help to Vietnam prisoners. Further, differences in the demographic backgrounds provide significant insight into the different coping and resistance methods of Korean and Vietnam prisoners.

Table 3: Demographic Information for Korean And Vietnam POWs

American Prisoners of War	Officers %	Enlisted Men and Non-Commissioned Officers %	Average Age	Average Level of Education
Korea[13]	5	95	21	9th Grade
Vietnam	93	14[14]	32[15]	College Degree

[12] Craig Howes, *Voices of the Vietnam POWs: Witness to Their Fight* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 7; Sam Johnson, Interview by Steve Maxner, 2001, Oral History, Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University.

[13] Department of the Army and George Washington University Human Resources Research Office, *Factors Related to the Collaboration and Resistance Behavior of U.S. Army PWs in Korea*, December, 1956, 48-52.

[14] Rochester and Kiley, *Honor Bound*, x. Percentages based on number of POWs repatriated during Operation Homecoming.

[15] Craig Howes, *Voices of the Vietnam POWs: Witness to Their Fight* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 7. Number stated was taken from Benjamin Schemmer, *The Raid* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 12.

The Korean Experience

The Korean War began in 1950 and by late spring of 1953 the North Koreans and Chinese released the first 149 American servicemen in Operation Little Switch. The North Koreans returned the vast majority of Americans captured through Operation Big Switch in late July and August of 1953. The total number of returned servicemen was just over four thousand. Army enlisted men constituted that largest portion of the prison population and many had been captured in large groups. Despite the relatively short time of captivity, approximately forty percent of the servicemen died in prison camps and many endured major hardships at the hands of the North Koreans and Chinese.[16]

Twenty-one American servicemen, all enlisted men, chose to stay in North Korea, and a large number of POWs collaborated. This news marred the return of all U.S. POWs and came to represent the experience. Although military authorities viewed the actions of relatively few as horrific and worthy of court-martial, the evidence of apathy and lack of discipline among the vast majority of the soldiers was notable. The soldiers spent much of their confinement in large camps, often after long marches through severe weather and difficult terrain. Most of these camps contained squalid and unsanitary living conditions, but prisoners were allowed a fair amount of freedom to move about and speak to one another. The preferred method of communist indoctrination was a formal

[16] Sommers, *The Korean Story*.

classroom structure. The North Koreans required prisoners to attend classes and provide evidence that they were learning. Few resisted.[17]

Historian Harry Spiller divided the experience into three time periods. The time from capture to imprisonment in the first camp represented the first period. This time was marked by the long "death marches" that prisoners endured. The second period was the time spent in permanent camps in horrible conditions. The final period of captivity was the time during peace negotiations when the captors attempted to improve the conditions of the prisoners in anticipation of their release.[18]

Many of the most prominent historical works examining the Korean POW experience were published shortly after the prisoners' return. Eugene Kinkead examined instances of collaboration in his 1959 *Why They Collaborated* and *In Every War But One.*[19] Virginia Pasely told the personal stories of the twenty-one American servicemen who chose to stay in North Korea in *21 Stayed: The Story of the American GI's Who Chose Communist China – Who They Were and Why They Stayed,* published in 1955.[20] A third important work is William Lindsay White's *The Captives of Korea: An Unofficial White Paper on the Treatment of War Prisoners,* published in 1957.[21] These works

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[17] Department of the Army, "U.S. Prisoners of War in the Korean Operation: A Study of Their Treatment and Handling by the North Korean Army and The Chinese Communist Forces" (Fort Meade, MD: Army Security Center, 1954), 208.

[18] Spiller, *American POWs in Korea.*

[19] Eugene Kinkead, *Why They Collaborate* (London: Longmans, 1959); *In Every War But One,* (New York: Norton, 1959).

[20] Virginia Pasely, *21 Stayed: The Story of the American GI's Who Chose Communist China – Who They Were and Why They Stayed* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1955).

contain valuable insights into the perception of the returned POWs at the time but lack the historical perspective and access to valuable government documents available in later years.

Recent historians who attempt to grapple with the issue of Korean prisoners of war include Raymond B. Lech. His *Broken Soldiers*, published in 2000, provides an excellent description of the POW experience both in captivity and after their return home. Lech personalizes the stories with occasional biographical sketches of the men held captive and uses debriefing transcripts, court-martial proceedings and other previously classified government documents not available to previous authors.[22] Another important work, Harry Spiller's *American POWs in Korea: Sixteen Personal Accounts*, was published in 1998. Spiller expertly provides the historical background necessary for a comprehensive understanding of the POW experience while maintaining the focus on the first-hand accounts of sixteen prisoners. Personal interviews and government documents provided the basis for his account.[23]

While autobiographies and collaborative works of most returned Vietnam prisoners took many years to be published, Korean War prisoners returned home to openly speak of their experience. Ward M. Millar, an Air Force officer who escaped from captivity, published *Valley of the Shadow* in 1955.[24] POW Lloyd W. Pate also

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[21] William Lindsay White, *The Captives of Korea: An Unofficial White Paper on the Treatment of War Prisoners* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957).

[22] Raymond B. Lech, *Broken Soldiers* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

[23] Spiller, *American POWs in Korea.*

[24] Ward M. Millar, *Valley of the Shadow* (New York: David McKay Company Inc., 1955).

published his autobiography, *Reactionary!*, in 1955.[25] These books contain vivid details and provide historians with first-hand accounts that are unavailable from other sources.

The Vietnam Experience

The American POW experience in Hanoi began in 1964 with the capture of Everett Alvarez, Jr., the first American serviceman to be captured and held in North Vietnam.[26] The experience would continue until 1973 when Operation Homecoming brought the return of 591 American prisoners of war.[27] Most interpretations of the POW experience during these nine years of captivity focus on patterns of torture. In 1965 the Vietnamese began a pattern of interrogation and systematic torture. The primary goal of these interrogation sessions was to obtain tape recordings of American servicemen denouncing the war, and to use them for propaganda. From 1965 to 1969, torture was an ever-present reality with only short breaks for the POWs as they continued to resist Vietnamese demands. From 1967 to 1969 the Vietnamese brought in Cuban torture experts. The Cuban Program, the most painful and damaging of the torture programs, was used on the hard-line resisters and most senior officers held at the Zoo, a POW camp

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[25] Lloyd W. Pate. *Reactionary!* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers. 1955).

[26] The Viet Cong operating in South Vietnam captured American servicemen as early as December 1961. Army Spec. 4 George Fryett was the first in a long list of Americans to be captured and held in South Vietnam. The early captives in the South either escaped, were released within one to three years, or died in captivity. One, Rocky Versace, who died in captivity, received the Medal of Honor posthumously in 2002. Rochester and Kiley, 60-61.

[27] Many of the 134 prisoners that did not return home in 1973 as part of Operation Homecoming, had been held in South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Some of these men, including some in North Vietnam, escaped, died in captivity or were given early release. The number 591 also includes 25 civilians. *Rochester and Kiley.*

in the Hanoi area of North Vietnam.[28] In addition to the torture, most Americans also experienced months and often years of solitary confinement in small, dark cells.

The POW community began to change in 1970 as the Vietnamese became more lenient. POWs were given new privileges such as the ability to leave their cell and mingle with other prisoners in the courtyard. Food rations were increased and the men began to hope that their improved treatment was an indication that their years in captivity were nearing an end.[29] All U.S. prisoners in the North were transferred to Camp Unity in late 1970 and they remained there until Operation Homecoming in 1973.

Several factors may have contributed to this shift in North Vietnamese policy. First, in September of 1969 Ho Chi Minh died. Policies were confused and historians Stuart Rochester and Frederick Kiley noted that there was a "general mellowing that followed the death of the North Vietnamese leader."[30] The Son Tay raid in November of 1970 also led to the centralization of all the prisoners to prevent more rescue attempts.[31] Finally, mirroring the experience of the Korean POWs, the improved conditions indicate that the North Vietnamese believed peace negotiations would soon end and the prisoners would be released. Ironically, the sense of closeness and camaraderie felt during the years of torture was sometimes difficult to sustain in the crowded living conditions of Camp Unity as the men learned to reintegrate themselves into a society of Americans.

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[28] POWs created names for each prison camp or camp area based on perceptions of the environment or their experience. Other names include Alcatraz, the Barn, the Plantation, Heartbreak Hotel and Camp Unity. For more information on the Cuban program, see *Rochester and Kiley*, 380-409.

[29] Rochester and Kiley, *Honor Bound,* 499-500.

[30] Ibid., 339.

[31] Ibid., 500.

In contrast to the Korean prisoner population, the majority of Vietnam prisoners of war held in camps in and around Hanoi were Air Force or Navy officers. Rather than being captured in large groups on the battlefield, these men were usually captured one or two at a time as an aircraft was shot down. Furthermore, the Air Force and Navy required pilots to have a college education and most of the men were career officers with a great deal of respect for military institutions.

Although many aspects of the Vietnam War have been examined, few historians have written about the experience of Vietnam prisoners of war. Monika Jensen-Stevenson and William Stevenson, in their text *Kiss the Boys Goodbye: How the United States Betrayed Its Own POWs in Vietnam,* discuss diplomacy and the covert government operations undertaken by the United States in efforts to free the Vietnam POWs. They focus particularly on the years following the 1973 return of the prisoners held in Hanoi and the idea that some men may have been left behind.[32]

The most scholarly and exhaustive look at the prisoner of war experience in Stuart I. Rochester and Frederick Kiley's *Honor Bound: American Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia 1961-1973.* Rochester and Kiley examine many aspects of the experience of prisoners of war held in South Vietnam as well as those held in Hanoi.[33]

Numerous autobiographies have proved valuable resources. Gerald Coffee's *Beyond Survival* and other autobiographies provide valuable firsthand accounts of the prisoner of war experience. The stories told in *Beyond Survival* are remarkably

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[32] Monika Jensen-Stevenson and William Stevenson, *Kiss the Boys Goodbye: How the United States Betrayed Its Own POWs in Vietnam* (New York: Penguin Group, 1990).

[33] Rochester and Kiley, *Honor Bound.*

consistent with other Vietnam POW narratives.[34] Several autobiographies, including Sam Johnson's *Captive Warriors: A Vietnam POW's Story*, Everett Alvarez and Anthony S. Pitch's *Chained Eagle*, and Eugene McDaniel's *Scars and Stripes* present the material in a similar format. Most autobiographies and oral histories begin with the author's military career, his shootdown, capture and then move into a description of his years in captivity interspersed with flashbacks to childhood or family. Each POW story emphasizes the importance of communication, the chain of command, religious faith and resistance to communist indoctrination and torture. The consistency should not call into question the authenticity of the accounts; rather it demonstrates the similarities of the experience for all servicemen. Most servicemen point to the unique communication system as the key to survival.[35]

The Code of Conduct

The Korean War and the release of POWs occurred at the height of the Red Scare in America. Under the spell of Senator Joseph McCarthy's unsubstantiated allegations, the American public increasingly feared communist infiltration of the United States government and society. With a fear of communism permeating American's daily lives, the return of POWs from communist control proved fascinating and the government and the media facilitated the interest. The Operations Coordinating Board of the US

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[34] Coffee, *Beyond Survival.*

[35] Sam Johnson, *Captive Warriors: A Vietnam POW's Story* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1992); Everett Alvarez and Anthony S. Pitch, *Chained Eagle* (New York: Donald I. Fine, 1989); Eugene McDaniel, and James L. Johnson. *Scars and Stripes: The True Story of One Man's courage in Facing Death as a Vietnam POW* (New York: Harvest House Publishers, 1975).

government enacted plans to ensure that the media had "all possible access to activities dealing with the evacuation and transfer of the PWs." The US Information Agency also made plans to "exploit" any public statements, or releases dealing with POWs.[36]

Relatives and newly repatriated POWs appeared on radio and television programs and many spoke to newspaper reporters. Stories such as "The Phoenixville Story: No One Can Say What A Man Will Do With A Pistol Pointed at His Head" and "Why Did Many GIs Cave In?" told of communist indoctrination and the overwhelming difficulties the prisoners had encountered. News coverage and public interest continued two years after the prisoners return. Sergeant Lloyd W. Pate told his story of resistance and brainwashing through twelve articles published in the *New York Herald Tribune* in 1955.[37]

The combined atmosphere of the Red Scare and public scrutiny demanded that some action be taken to ensure that American POWs were better prepared to honorably survive any future POW experience. The military establishment recognized the need to develop a strategy to prevent collaboration and improve resistance in future prisoner of war situations. The Defense Advisory Committee on Prisoners of War submitted the Code of Conduct for President Eisenhower's approval in 1955. The Code, with short instructions and simple language, was approved and promulgated by Executive Order 10631 and reaffirmed twice in later years. In the introduction to the Code of Conduct

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[36] Operations Coordinating Board, "Release of POWs in Korea," January 18, 1954, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, KS. Operations Coordinating Board Central Files Series.

[37] Lloyd Pate, "The Soldier on The Hook: The Hardest Thing I Ever Had To Do," *The New York Herald Tribune*, September- October, 1955, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, KS.

military personnel are told that, "to survive captivity honorably would demand from you great courage, deep dedication and high motivation."[38] The six articles of the Code were designed to encourage these traits in American prisoners of war:

> Article I
>
> I am an American fighting man. I serve the forces which guard my country and our way of life. I am prepared to give my life in their defense.
>
> Article II
>
> I will never surrender of my own free will. If in command I will never surrender my men while they still have the means to resist.
>
> Article III
>
> If I am captured I will continue to resist by all means available. I will make every effort to escape and aid others to escape. I will accept neither parole nor special favors from the enemy.
>
> Article IV
>
> If I become a prisoner of war I will keep faith with my fellow prisoners. I will give no information or take part in any action which might be harmful to my comrades. If I am senior, I will take command. If not, I will obey the lawful orders of those appointed over me and will back them up in every way.
>
> Article V
>
> When questioned, should I become a prisoner of war, I am bound to give only name, rank, service number, and date of birth. I will evade answering further questions to the best of my ability. I will make no oral or written statements disloyal to my country and its allies or harmful to their cause.
>
> Article VI
>
> I will never forget that I am an American fighting man, responsible for my actions, and dedicated to the principles which made my country free. I will trust in God and in the United States of America.[39]

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[38] U.S. Department of Defense, American Forces Information Services, *Code of the U.S. Fighting Force* (Washington, D.C., 1988); Craig Howes, *Voices of the Vietnam POWs: Witnesses to Their Fight* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 17.

[39] *Code of the U.S. Fighting Force*, 4-14.

Following the approval of the Code, the Defense Advisory Committee on Prisoners of War distributed 28,000 copies of a report titled "The Fight Continues After the Battle," to primary and secondary schools, 1,800 to Universities, and 3,000 to the public. The committee also worked with the Metropolitan Museum of Art to produce a "series of illustrative art posters to capture the spirit of each article of the Code."[40] The development and implementation of the Code of Conduct was carefully followed and publicized by the Department of Defense for several years.

Vietnam was the first test of the Code of Conduct. In *Voices of the Vietnam POWs: Witnesses to Their Fight,* Craig Howes takes an interesting look at the Code of Conduct and the evolving interpretation of it from 1964 to 1973. As prisoners faced extreme torture, they developed interpretations of the Code that would allow them to maintain their honor and survive.[41] Howes argues that the Code proved very important to the survival of Vietnam prisoners and that the flexibility of the leadership in their interpretation of the Code was a necessary response to the evolving circumstances.

As the years of confinement continued for American prisoners in North Vietnam, Articles III, IV, and V underwent close evaluation. Article III encouraged prisoners to attempt escape, but this was strongly discouraged by the military leadership placed in authority according to article IV Escapes were dangerous both for the escapee and for

[40] Department of Defense, "Code of Conduct Program: First Progress Report," 1955, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, KS.

[41] Howes, *Voices of the Vietnam POWs.*

those left behind. It was impossible for Americans to blend in among an Asian population and the probability of success was too small to justify the risk.

The establishment of a chain of command proved effective in dealing with a myriad of issues. Senior officers not only dealt with the issue of escape but also with the language of Article V As torture became a common experience, the prisoners shared a sense of failure as they broke under the pressure of their captors. The interpretations of Article V offered by senior officers encouraged prisoners to resist torture to the best of their ability and allowed them the flexibility to fail and yet retain their honor.

Conclusion

Numerous differences existed in the experiences of Korean War POWs and Vietnam War POWs, but despite these differences there also were significant similarities. The chapters that follow will examine North Korean and North Vietnamese indoctrination techniques, the physical condition of the prisoners, the living conditions and relationships of the prisoners, the composition of the community and the chain of command.

In conclusion, this work will assess the degree to which each group was successful in resisting collaboration. Prisoners in Korea and Vietnam responded in remarkably different ways and yet there were many similarities in their circumstances. The primary differences in the results from Vietnam can usually be shown to be a direct or indirect result of the Code of Conduct. The repatriation of Korean POWs was mired in questions of collaboration and brainwashing. This stands in sharp contrast the honorable

return and the joyous welcome extended to POWs involved in Operation Homecoming in 1973. This work will present conclusions about the effectiveness of communist indoctrination of United States military personnel.

CHAPTER II

INTERROGATION AND INDOCTRINATION

> "It is not a pretty story that confronts us. It is a story of terrible physical and moral degradation. It concerns men shaken loose from their foundations of moral value – men beaten down by the conditioning which the science of Pavlov reserves for dogs and rats – all in a vicious attempt to make them accomplices to a frightful lie."
>
> "The spirit of man runs deeper than the reflexes of Pavlov."
>
> Dr. Charles W. Mayo, October 26, 1953.[1]

Brainwashing, "intense, forcible indoctrination aimed at replacing a person's basic convictions with an alternative set of fixed belief," became a household word in the 1950s as Americans became acquainted with the term through the experiences of American prisoners of war in North Korea.[2] The public found the systematic indoctrination and brainwashing encountered by servicemen in North Korea shocking. Never before had prisoners of war encountered this new type of warfare. As the Department of Defense investigated brainwashing techniques they discovered the science of Russian Psychologist Ivan Pavlov.

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[1] Operations Coordinating Board, "The Question of Impartial Investigation of Charges of Use by UN Forces of Bacteriological Warfare," Dr. Charles W. Mayo, October 26, 1953, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, KS, Operations Coordinating Board Central Files Series.

[2] *The American Heritage Dictionary* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1994).

The Theory of Conditioned Reflex

Ivan Pavlov was born to a rural parish priest outside Moscow in 1849. In 1870 he began attending St. Petersburg University studying physiology, and completed his post-graduate studies at the Medico-Surgical Academy. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1904 for his work in physiology before beginning the work on a theory that laid the foundation for psychological warfare.

Pavlov conducted experiments in conditioned reflexes using dogs. Pavlov first examined the patterns of salivation among the dogs when they were presented with food.[3] With these patterns established, Pavlov paired the food with lights or noises. For example, a buzzing sound might come right before a dog was given food. Soon the dog realized that every time he heard the buzzing sound he was also going to get food, and he began to salivate at the sound of the buzzer.[4] As psychologist Jeffery Gray wrote and the Soviets worked to prove, Pavlov's experiment was not to measure the saliva of dogs but to "uncover the general principles which underlie the particular phenomena observed in any one set of circumstances."[5]

The Soviet Union and countries "under strong Soviet" influence adopted and taught Pavlovian ideas.[6] Despite Pavlov's strident declarations that his experiments could not be applied to humans, Soviet leaders believed differently. Soviet scientists

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[3] Ibid., 38.

[4] Ibid., 33-50.

[5] Ibid., 54.

[6] Ibid., 37.

conducted human experiments in conditioned reflexes and disseminated the lessons learned throughout communist nations.[7] Communist leaders searched for a way to create the "new Soviet man" who thought in terms of "we" instead of "I."[8]

Documents from the U.S. Psychological Strategy Board in 1955 show that U.S. government officials believed that Chinese and North Korean interrogators had received special training in the Soviet Union and that the Soviets had direct involvement in prisoner of war camps in North Korea.[9] In 1953 the National Security Council received information that "the Director General of the POW control bureau was a Colonel Andreyev, USSR."[10] The Psychological Strategy Board identified the application of the Pavlovian principles of conditioned reflex in North Korean prison camps as a "combination of science and savagery for the purpose of exploitation for political purposes."[11]

American medical personnel held prisoner in North Korea described a well-developed program for brainwashing. "It is important to realize that every aspect of the daily life of the prisoner from the moment of capture to the time of release, was part of

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[7] OCB, "Brainwashing: The Communist Experiment with Mankind," 1955, Eisenhower Library, OCB Central Files Series, 4-5.

[8] Edward Hunter, *Brainwashing: The Story of Men Who Defied It* (New York: Farrar Straus & Cudahy, 1956) 22-25.

[9] Psychological Strategy Board, "Psychological Warfare Aspects of Communist Treatment of Prisoners of War," Eisenhower Library, Psychological Strategy Board Central Files Series.

[10] National Security Council, "Atrocities Speech – Preliminary Synopsis," 1953, Eisenhower Library, National Security Council.

[11] Psychological Strategy Board, "Psychological Warfare Aspects of Communist Treatment of Prisoners of War."

the general plan of indoctrination."[12] Another report described the communist program as one dependent on the belief that "the human being, robbed of his free will, humiliated, in poor health, confused, separated from the outside world, and exposed to physical hardships, will, over a period of time, become as docile as a dog on Pavlov's experimental table."[13] One former POW labeled this the "campaign of fear."[14]

Food was one example of the application of Pavlov's principles in North Korea. Prisoners became conditioned to receiving an increase in the quantity or quality of food as it related to their acceptance of the study program and communist ideas.[15] Food could also be used to create one of a myriad of emotions designed to keep the prisoners off balance. Jerry Coffee, a Vietnam POW, recalled hearing the sound of soup being poured into dishes. "The sound of the soup slopping would always heighten my sympathy for Pavlov's dog, and would trigger new gastronomic fantasies each time: cold milk, brownies, ice cream, a crisp apple, pizza, fired chicken, and on and on and on."[16] Prison guards during both conflicts deliberately created confusion, fear, physical pain and uncertainty to keep the prisoners compliant.[17] Vietnam prisoners of war discovered and quickly recognized these tactics in the organized system of indoctrination.

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[12] Sommers, *The Korean Story*, 208.

[13] OCB, "Brainwashing," 3.

[14] Paul T. O'Dowd, "Operation Brainwash," The Mark Clark Papers, The Museum and Archive of The Citadel, Charleston, S.C.

[15] Sommers, *The Korean Story*, 208.

[16] Coffee, *Beyond Survival*, 85.

[17] OCB, "Brainwashing," 3.

Reasons for Indoctrination

Why were Pavlovian ideas adopted and applied in North Korea and North Vietnam? A report issued by the U.S. Army Security Center in 1954 identified three "possible explanations" for the new psychological warfare in POW camps. The first reason was propaganda.[18] The Korean and Vietnam wars contained the added element of ideology. Korea and Vietnam were not simply wars fought between the United States and the enemy nation. They were wars fought between communism and the ideals and values of the United States. North Korean and North Vietnamese captors attached a great deal of importance to American servicemen willing to publicly denounce the war and speak in favor of the enemies of the United States. The captors viewed this as a great victory, and widely publicized minor statements made by prisoners.

The captors also used indoctrination to help maintain a manageable prison population.[19] The prisoners in North Korea and Vietnam experienced an unsettling combination of routine and constant uncertainty. Korean prisoners experienced months of food shortages during which the numbers of men dying from starvation rose each day, and then suddenly conditions might improve, but the improvement was paired with increased indoctrination.[20] Uncertainty served to keep the prisoners in a constant state of uneasiness, never given them the time to become comfortable or to contemplate plans for escapes or revolts. Vietnam POWs, although often in solitary or small group

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[18] Department of the Army, "U.S. Prisoners of War in the Korean Operation: A Study of Their Treatment and Handling by the North Korean Army and The Chinese Communist Forces" (Fort Meade, MD: Army Security Center, 1954), 208.

[19] Ibid., 208.

[20] Lloyd W. Pate, *Reactionary!*, 53-54 and 64.

confinement, also faced the consistency of routine interspersed with enough surprise torture to continually keep them on the edge of uncertainty. As Eugene McDaniel noted, "the only thing consistent about the North Vietnamese is their inconsistency."[21]

The third possible reason for the intense brainwashing and indoctrination was "the conversion of the POWs to communist doctrine."[22] The prisoners of war in Vietnam showed remarkable resistance to the barrage of anti-American propaganda and pro-communist statements they encountered during interrogation and torture. Perhaps as a result of the stiff resistance, North Vietnamese interrogators did not aggressively seek true conversions to communism. In contrast, the North Koreans worked diligently at educating their prisoners and enjoyed some degree of success. Twenty-one Americans chose to remain in communist countries after the prisoner exchange and many others professed belief in communist ideas during their time in camps. The same Army study that proposed these three reasons for indoctrination also stated that, "the prisoners who have been affected were less ideologically drawn to communism than simply possessed with a desire to exist with as little personal discomfort as possible."[23]

The Korean Experience

The Korean prisoner of war experience was unlike any other that American military personnel had endured. The author of a report entitled, "Brainwashing: The Communist Experiment with Mankind," noted that "in the Korean War the struggle after

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[21] McDaniel with Johnson, *Scars and Stripes*, 49.

[22] Department of the Army, "U.S. Prisoners of War in the Korean Operation," 208.

[23] Ibid., 209.

capture was not over, it had just begun in a totally different way."[24] Immediately prisoners were faced with incentives to create an environment of complicity and cooperation. Many prisoners faced initiation into the camp system with a simple speech.

> American and British POW· you don't have to be afraid. We Chinese People's Volunteer forces guarantee you safety so long as you have laid down your arms. Our lenient policy promises: (1) No killing of POWs. (2) No mental humiliation. (3) No confiscation of personal property. Now obey orders strictly ... and do as you are told.[25]

When one POW asked for clarification of the "Lenient Policy" he received this reply, "Our policy is lenient because we do not kill you." Without the ominous clarification this appeared to be reasonable and met the expectations of most American prisoners. Army training films taught that prisoners of war "had certain rights," but for most prisoners the rights to which they believed they were entitled would not be apparent in the months or years of their imprisonment.[26] A taste of what prisoners could expect in the future could be seen in statements insisting that "POWs were 'civilians drafted to fight Wall Street's war' and were now 'liberated.'"[27]

From late December 1950 to early spring of 1951 the North Koreans tested their theories of indoctrination and brainwashing on an early group of prisoners including eighteen U.S. Marines. From the very beginning these prisoners were told that the most cooperative would receive early release. With this incentive, it was easy to establish

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[24] OCB, "Brainwashing," 1.

[25] Department of the Army, "U.S. Prisoners of War in the Korean Operation," 11.

[26] OCB, "Brainwashing," 1.

[27] David Polk, *Korean War: Ex-Prisoners of War* (Paducah, KY: Turner Publishing, 1993) 31.

cooperation and physical force rarely had to be used. For eight weeks the prisoners attended lectures and classes on communist theory and practice. The prison camp officials constantly praised communism while condemning western culture. In the summer of 1951 many of these prisoners, models of indoctrination technique, were given communist propaganda and released near the front lines to return to U.N. forces.[28]

Viewing their initial experiment as a success the North Koreans and Chinese modeled all prisoner camps after this experience. Daily routine for prisoners included classroom lectures, free study periods and reporting times. The model camp for indoctrination was Camp 5, nicknamed "Pyoktong University" by the prisoners.[29] Separated according to rank and race, the communists tailored their lectures to the different cultural groups.[30] A favorite lecture topic for the indoctrinators, many of whom had received college educations in the United States, was the "Wall Street money changers." In an attempt to raise resentment based on social inequity the indoctrinators would ask, "Where are the millionaire's sons?"

Captors first required prisoners to provide extensive personal histories, which could later be used by the communists against the prisoners. The POWs were then provided notebooks and pencils for note taking during lectures. After spending an entire morning listening to a lecture they broke up into smaller groups in the afternoon and a

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[28] Department of the Army, "U.S. Prisoners of War in the Korean Operation," 215-216.

[29] Ibid., 220-225

[30] Polk, *Korean War*, 58.

fellow prisoner led them through a prepared list of discussion questions. Each prisoner's response was recorded and could later be used for rewards or punishment. [31]

The North Koreans segregated POW Sergeant Lloyd Pate from the rest of the POWs and placed in a squad for the hard-line resisters or "reactionaries." During the discussion session the prisoners felt free to speak out against the communist propaganda and argue with those who stood up to support the enemy. The "reactionaries" singled out the men they identified as succumbing to the brainwashing. They talked to those at risk, and Pate believed that many were encouraged and strengthened to resist. [32] If talking failed to change the prisoner's behavior Pate and his fellow reactionaries would resort to threats and physical violence.[33] The men had remarkable freedom to move around the camp and speak their mind.

After a time of forced participation, the captors instituted a more relaxed program and then created a voluntary study program, in which many prisoners chose to participate. A former POW and head of communist instruction for his unit, reported that for a period of time the only requirement was daily group readings from "The History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union." "I did most of the reading and chose a few assistants who I trusted to read in the most uninteresting manner and make fun of the communist doctrine or show how it was dangerous to every American."[34]

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[31] Department of the Army, "U.S. Prisoners of War in the Korean Operation," 220-225.

[32] Pate, *Reactionary!*, 76-88.

[33] Ibid., 91.

[34] "Political Activity Under Communists in North Korea 1950-1953, The Papers of General Mark Clark, The Museum and Archive of The Citadel, Charleston, S.C.

Those prisoners interested in the study of communist theory and practice were encouraged. The captors provided ample reading material and other incentives. Libraries in the prison camps provided communist books, magazines and newspapers as well as the works of some non-communist writers. Camp officials developed an intricate system of rewards. "Toward Truth and Peace," a newspaper published by the prisoners at Camp 5, provided a biased account of the war and provided contributors money to spend at what Americans call the "PX" or Post Exchange. The ability to write a letter or make a recording was held as a privilege for those who earned it.[35]

Organized and systematic torture was not present in most North Korean prison camps. Although some instances of severe torture were reported, these were in rare cases where individuals refused to participate in any part of the communist indoctrination plan or actively worked against their captors. Other instances of abuse such as "pistol slapping and beating with rubber hoses" were described, but as one report noted there was "more shouting and gesticulating in the process than there was actual physical injury."[36] The physical abuse was most often the result of refusal to provide the communists with a peace petition or some other tangible evidence that their program was working.[37] The lack of physical violence is notable when compared with the amount of

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[35] Department of the Army. "U.S. Prisoners of War in the Korean Operation," 226-237.

[36] Psychological Strategy Board. "Returned POWs at Valley Forge General Hospital." H.S. Craig. 1953. Eisenhower Library. National Security Council. Status of Projects Subseries.

[37] Ibid.

camp or war information shared with the North Koreans and Chinese. Torture and violence was not necessary to make the men cooperate.[38]

The North Koreans and Chinese compensated for the lack of torture through other forms of manipulation. The captors controlled every aspect of a prisoner's life including his emotions. Former POWs related accounts of guards taking away everything the prisoners possessed and returning everything after an indefinite period of time. The guards and prison administrators used this to create certain feelings in the prisoners. The initial feelings of resentment or fear were replaced by warm feelings of gratitude when guards returned the prisoners' possessions.[39] Air Force Captain Zach Dean had a similar response to a life-threatening situation. He recalled "they brought you to death's door, and when you were about to enter, they pulled you back. You were thankful to them for saving your life."[40]

The North Koreans and Chinese also managed to use the prisoners against each other. Captors promised prisoners better conditions and personal advantages for those who were willing to watch and inform on others.[41] The tactics created distrust among the prison population. The prison officials were even able to create the illusion that one prisoner was informing on the others. A government document described a possible

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[38]Department of the Army. "U.S. Prisoners of War in the Korean Operation," 160-161.

[39]Edward Hunter, *Brainwashing: The Story of Men who Defied It* (New York: Farrar Straus & Cudahy, 1956) 97.

[40] Ibid., 125.

[41] Polk, *Korean War*, 39.

scenario in which this illusion could be created. The scenario involved Private A, Private B and Private C. Private A was called to a meeting with a camp official. The official made some statements about the war and Private A responded by mumbling, "heard that before." Private A offered no valuable information and was told to return to his quarters. At the next meal Privates B and C notice that A received more food and they asked what he told the camp official. After a few days another Private was taken in for questioning and told that Private A had informed on some prisoners. When Privates C and B found out about Private A, the word spread around the camp and Private A turned to the prison officials to protect him from the other prisoners. Private A was innocent but the illusion of guilt created a climate of suspicion and mistrust.[42]

The captors gained a great deal of information through interrogations, which were an important part of the indoctrination process. Although military information was important, the North Koreans and Chinese were more interested in personal and political information. Military information was primarily used to confirm what their intelligence had already provided. Political information allowed the captors to judge the degree of resistance they could expect from a particular prisoner.[43]

Initial interrogations were focused on military information that could provide immediate results. A captured North Korean manual states that these brief interrogations should be conducted during the initial processing at the front lines and at the regimental headquarters.[44] Based on numerous autobiographical accounts that fail to mention

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[42] OCB, "Brainwashing," 6-7.

[43] Department of the Army, "U.S. Prisoners of War in the Korean Operation," 146.

interrogations until arrival at a permanent camp it is unlikely that interrogations were carried out in a routine and organized manner.

Later interrogations were often conducted in an informal way. For example, an interrogator might begin with "a smile and 'Now we visit.'"[45] The scenario resembled the "good cop, bad cop" routine. One captor almost becomes a friend, even offering to help answer the prisoner's questions although he is not supposed to.[46] A captured Chinese Communist book entitled, "Infantry Reconnaissance," describes the proper treatment of a prisoner.

> During interrogation, it is necessary to maintain a calm attitude and to keep the conversation flowing freely. The attitude toward the prisoners of war must be kind; give them food and cigarettes. The attitude toward the wounded is especially important. Prohibit confiscation of their bedding, clothes, and shoes.[47]

Interrogation techniques and brainwashing where often subtly intertwined. As historian Edward Hunter noted, "brainwashing depended on the subject's ignorance of it."[48] Former prisoner Roosevelt Lunn, segregated with a group of African-Americans, recalled that as camp conditions improved the guards began to ask friendly questions. In an understated way, the captors began to inquire about the treatment of African-Americans in the United States. Camp conditions continued to improve and the traditional system of indoctrination began. Lunn recalled that despite improving

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[44] Ibid., 147.

[45] Ibid., 159.

[46] Hunter, *Brainwashing*, 46-48.

[47] Department of the Army, "U.S. Prisoners of War in the Korean Operation," 165.

[48] Hunter, *Brainwashing*, 16.

conditions the men encouraged each other the resist talking to the enemy. They quoted proverbs such as "silence is golden" to help them remain strong.[49]

Air Force Major David F MacGhee disguised his knowledge during interrogations. MacGhee was familiar with long-range bombers and had worked with Chiang Kai-Shek. He kept this a secret and pretended to be dumb and irresponsible.[50] When asked to draw diagrams and write all that he remembered, he drew things incorrectly and wrote lies.[51] According to one prisoner, "Nobody should admit a single detail under Red pressure, but if facts have to be given under pressure, imaginations should be ready to provide the sort of misinformation that will lead the brainwasher far astray."[52]

The North Koreans and Chinese hoped that by improving conditions they would encourage the men to talk about their life in America. The communists emphasized that, "a man's unhappy home life, racial minorities' persecution, and possible joblessness at home were the results of capitalism."[53] Talking was intended for the men to realize that they were being treated horribly in the United States and to create favorable conditions for introducing the virtuous communist system.

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[49] Ibid., 94-95.

[50] "Accounts of POWs During the Korean War," The Papers of General Mark Clark, The Citadel, Charleston, S.C., 160-161.

[51] Ibid., 162-163.

[52] Ibid., 308.

[53] Polk, *Korean War*, 57-58.

Sometimes prisoners were given the opportunity to write on a wide range of topics. Prisoners chose to write essays on "How to play golf" and "The scenery from San Francisco to Pusan."[54] Other essays discussed prisoners in the camp and details about life in the United States. Perhaps some prisoners used these opportunities to escape the realities of camp life and remember a happier time, but the North Koreans and Chinese used these essays for information. The captors would carefully read the essays and return to the author with questions about what they had written. While some prisoners attempted to provide the communists with the least useful information possible while still appearing to be cooperative, others unintentionally provided valuable information.[55]

The psychological warfare encountered in North Korea would be found in a slightly different form in North Vietnam a little over a decade later.

The Vietnam Experience

Servicemen captured and held prisoner during the Vietnam War experienced circumstances very different from the North Korean camps they had learned about in survival school. The Vietnamese interrogators spent less time on educating the servicemen on the errors of the American system and the virtues of the communist system than on instituting systematic and crippling torture regimens. Although torture was almost always accompanied by some demand for information or propaganda, it was employed as a method of inducement on a much more regular and personal basis.

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[54] Department of the Army, "U.S. Prisoners of War in the Korean Operation," 159.

[55] Polk, *The Korean War*, 58-59.

Although it was emphasized less than in North Korea, education was a factor in North Vietnam. Periodically the men were provided with communist reading material including news clippings from the *Vietnamese News Agency* and a weekly tabloid, *The Vietnam Courier.*[56] Eugene McDaniel commented to a guard one day that he had nothing to do and the guard returned with two books *Ho Chi Minh's Teaching* and *Guerrilla.* Recognizing the blatant attempt at indoctrination McDaniel refused to read the books.[57]

Propaganda films and Hanoi Hannah's radio broadcasts also provided a constant source of communist propaganda but did have benefits. By listening carefully to the Voice of Vietnam broadcasts, the prisoners learned to "read between the lines."[58] Jerry Coffee wrote that "although they were intended to demoralize us and shift our thinking, the broadcasts were generally more beneficial than not."[59] Occasionally prisoners would be taken outside to individual tents and shown a film. Despite the unsettling nature of most films such as on anti war riots in the U.S., most prisoners were a source of information.[60]

Although the North Vietnamese would have happily accepted any converts to communism, recruitment was not their main objective. Any doubt or skepticism they could create about the United States in the mind of an American serviceman would serve

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[56] Alvarez and Pitch, *Chained Eagle,* 74.

[57] McDaniel, *Scars and Stripes,* 48.

[58] Gerald Coffee, *Beyond Survival,* 244.

[59] Ibid., 244.

[60] Ben Pollard, Interview by Dr. James C. Hassdorf, 1992, Transcribed Tape Recording, p. 46, Vietnam Archives, Texas Tech University, Lubbock.

their cause but they could obtain propaganda, their primary goal, without it. Initially, following the Korean example, the Vietnamese questioned every serviceman for current military intelligence. When they believed they had exhausted this line of questioning the interrogators turned to politics and propaganda.

Initiation into Hoa Loa Prison, infamously known as the Hanoi Hilton, typically began with solitary confinement and intense interrogations followed by torture. Solitary confinement might last for two weeks or continue for six months depending upon the number of new prisoners arriving during a given period of time. William Beekman described the prison as an "eerie, spooky place." Beekman could hear water dripping off the walls.[61] Jon Black remembers names and old dried blood on the walls of his cell.[62] This common experience would lead the men into close personal relationships as each man relied on the strength of others in the POW community.

Initial interrogations often were conducted for the purpose of obtaining military information. John Borling recalled the Vietnamese being especially interested in information about planes and targets.[63] North Vietnamese interrogators asked William Breckner to explain how the new laser-guided bombs operated.[64] Different Vietnamese officials interrogated Air Force Major Robert Bagley for military information over a

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[61] William D. Beekman. Interview by Dr. James C. Hasdorff, 1991. Transcribed Tape Recording, 30. Ibid.

[62] Jon D. Black. Interview by Dr. James C. Hasdorff, 1991. Transcribed Tape Recording, 34. Ibid

[63] John L. Borling, Interview by Dr. James C. Hasdorff, 1991. Transcribed Tape Recording, 13. Ibid.

[64] William J. Breckner. Interview by Dr. James C. Hasdorff, 1992. Transcribed Tape Recording, 26. Ibid.

period of several days with only a few minutes of rest between sessions.[65] John Fer realized that when the military interrogator, nicknamed Eagle, would leave periodically during his interrogation he was going to interrogate his crewmembers. He would then return to Fer and check the validity of the stories.[66] When the Vietnamese believed they had exhausted their captive's military knowledge they moved on to other topics.

During the years when torture was common and yet not routine, the men began to show signs of Pavlov's conditioned reflex theory, however their reflexes were not the responses their interrogators hoped for. The prisoners' secret communication system enabled the men to know what was going on even within their own camp and building. The Vietnamese used torture in the camps as a means to extract information in the form of a letter or tape, which they would use for propaganda. Often prisoners would go months without torture and suddenly the horror would return. Torture of one POW following a "quiz" session, always meant the same was going to happen to others. The prisoners felt the expected response of fear as each knew the torture that awaited him when he was called out, but the prisoners countered this response with preparation. The prisoners did their best when they were prepared, or as Alvarez said, "to be forewarned is to be forearmed."[67]

When the Vietnamese returned the first man taken out for a "quiz," he would tap out a message on the wall utilizing an intricate tap code based on an alphabetic grid to

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[65] Rod Gragg, *Bobby Bagley: POW* (Van Nuys: Bible Voice Inc., 1978), 20.

[66] John Fer. Interview by Dr. James C. Hasdorff, 1991. Transcribed Tape Recording, 15. Ibid.

[67] Alvarez and Pitch, *Chained Eagle*, 172.

describe what type of information the Vietnamese were looking for and how far they were willing to take the torture to get it. In 1966 Paul Kari was taken out for a "quiz." When the Vietnamese returned him to his cell after several days he tapped out a message describing his torture and what the Vietnamese wanted. The guards arrived to take Alvarez the following day. Armed with the information Kari provided, Alvarez had time to mentally prepare for the ordeal that lay ahead.[68] One strategy adopted by many prisoners was to write, "drivel and lies in stilted, backwoods English."[69] Getting away with this was risky but provided the men with some sense of satisfaction.

The North Vietnamese carefully planned and timed their 'quiz' sessions. This tended to work as an incentive for those prisoners who wished to hold out against their demands. Everett Alvarez recalled being taken for a quiz and ordered to write a letter of apology to the people of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. In the letter he was to confess to war crimes and promise never to bomb Vietnam again. As Alvarez wrote, "In the intervals when they left me alone to change my mind and confess, I heard them working over Tom Barrett and Scotty Morgan. Their cries carried full-throated across the gaps between our buildings."[70] The Vietnamese had clearly given up on producing converts to communism based on rational arguments and positive enticement. The North Vietnamese relied on the idea of conditioned response to fear. Prisoners had personal knowledge of the horrors of torture and when exposed to the sounds of torture they became conditioned to experience extreme fear..

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[68] Ibid., 177.

[69] Pollard, Oral History, 46.

[70] Alvarez and Pitch, *Chained Eagle*, 160-161.

Prisoners often lied and some men cleverly invented elaborate fictitious stories to recount for their captors. Paul Kari, when forced to tell about his military career, drew from his childhood experiences on a farm and created military bases named for machinery companies such as Camp Case of Fort John Deere.[71] Perhaps Kari used these childhood memories as a means to escape the reality of his situation. According to other POWs it was dangerous to escape reality and create fictional stories. George Day remembered that, "it didn't pay to lie about nothings. The memory cells needed to be saved for important lies." Men would work hard to memorize and pass along the lies that they had told. Being prepared and knowing what one had said was important in order to prevent the Vietnamese from being able to use one prisoner against another or to trap one in a lie.[72]

Prisoners during the Vietnam War also had the guidelines provided by the Code of Conduct. The Code proved especially important when men faced the fear of interrogation and torture. Despite much time in isolation, senior officer Navy Commander James B. Stockdale was able to implement three policies, which traveled throughout most of the camp facilities. In 1965 he issued the "bounce back" order. This policy stated that prisoners should endure torture to the best of their ability, recover, and make the Vietnamese continue to torture them for more information.[73] In 1967 he issued

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[71] Paul A Kari. Interview by Dr. James C. Hasdorff, 1992. Transcribed Tape Recording, 50. The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock.

[72] George Day, *Return with Honor* (Mesa, AZ.: Champlin Museum Press, 1989), 82.

[73] Howes, *Voices of the Vietnam POWs*, 30.

the BACK US policy which stressed "unity over self" and also spelled out orders against bowing in public, making broadcasts, admitting to war crimes and showing appreciation to the Vietnamese.[74] The third group of policies, the "Plums," were the result of new situations faced by large groups of men living in Camp Unity after 1970.[75]

Senior officers were responsible for setting the regulations for permissible behavior. This was a challenge for leaders in the later years of imprisonment as new captives were introduced into the system. John Alpers, captured in 1972, went through Jungle Survival School in the Philippines from 1971-1972. At this time the interpretation of the Code of Conduct had been altered from the time when many early prisoners had received instruction. Rather than strictly adhering to the rule stating that prisoners would only reveal their name, rank, serial number and date of birth, prisoners were given more leeway. They were allowed to give a little information if it meant that they would be able to get their name out or confuse the enemy. They were also authorized to write letters or give interviews if they could find a way to encode messages for the United States. Alpers stated that "the policy by 1971 was that we were encouraged to try and get ourselves in an environment where we could write a letter and encode a secret message, where we could get in front of a reporter who might be able to get something out." Jerry Singleton believes this "second line of defense" was necessary to guard against the overwhelming guilt that every prisoner experienced when he succumbed to torture.[76] This new

[74] Rochester and Kiley, *Honor Bound*, 298.

[75] Howes, *Voices of the Vietnam POWs,* 31.

[76] Jerry A. Singleton. Interview by Dr. James C. Hasdorff. 1992. Transcribed Tape Recording. 57-58. The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock.

interpretation of the Code of Conduct caused problems for those prisoners captured in the early years. They had sacrificed a great deal to uphold the standards of the Code of Conduct and felt that the new prisoners were weak.[77]

The Code of Conduct also removed some of the power the guards held over the prisoners. As part of their military training Vietnam POWs had studied the experience of Korean War POWs and a large part of their story was the ability of the guards to manipulate. As earlier described, Korean guards controlled the POWs' possessions and provided gifts, or special favors.[78] By following the rule that POWs were not to accept special favors or preferential treatment, most Vietnam POWs guarded against the ability of the camp officials to create a divided environment. The POWs were knowledgeable of the mental tactics being employed and worked hard to make sure they failed.

Occasionally prisoners found other ways to protect themselves against indoctrination and interrogation. Colonel Ted Guy, senior officer in a camp, used communication lines to establish unilateral camp policies dealing with specific questions of United States policy. After initial interrogations for military information the focus of interrogation turned toward politics and propaganda.[79] When Guy learned about a certain line of interrogation taking place during torture sessions he was able to formulate a camp policy pertaining to the specific issue. He had once written a paper on China, for

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[77] Alpers, Oral History, 50-51.

[78] Hunter, *Brainwashing and the Story of Men Who Defied It*, 97.

[79] Day, *Return with Honor*, 82.

example, and the sentiments he expressed in his paper became camp policy and enabled the POWs to answer in a unified manner.[80]

Conclusion

A comparison of the indoctrination and interrogation of Korean and Vietnam POWs shows many similarities and many differences. The captors in both conflicts seemed to have a firm understanding of Pavlov's theory of conditioned reflexes. Although one cannot know the number of guards who had formal training in this theory, it is evident that many had the basic knowledge necessary to elicit certain responses from their prisoners. It is interesting that the North Koreans and Vietnamese used this knowledge to achieve very different ends.

While the North Koreans clearly focused on education as a means of converting Americans to communism, the North Vietnamese cared less about making good communists than making good propaganda. The North Koreans provided a highly developed educational programming, complete with English speaking and sometimes American educated instructors and a library with English language books.[81] Through the schedule of classes and lecture books the North Koreans and Chinese expected to find American soldiers soaking up the values of communism. The lack of physical coercion suggests that the North Koreans and Chinese wanted to produce lasting changes in the minds of the prisoners. The guards and administrators were not above using

[80] Grant, *Survivors*, 262.

[81] Department of the Army, "U.S. Prisoners of War in the Korean Operation," 223, 226.

manipulation, but their methods were subtle to create the illusion that the prisoners were making decisions of their own free will.

The North Vietnamese did not provide the organized system found in Korea. Books and other reading material were occasionally provided but in a way that made it seem to be an afterthought rather than part of a well-planned program.[82] The emphasis in North Vietnam was propaganda. Because the captors controlled what information about the prisoners became public it was irrelevant whether the prisoners believed the statements they were making. Statements recorded or written after a torture session served the purpose of the North Vietnamese as well as a statement made out of conviction.

The prisoner of war camps in North Korea and North Vietnam were battlegrounds for the hearts and minds of American servicemen. In the war between communism and the United States words became a valuable weapon and the communists worked hard to make the most of the resources they possessed. Prisoners were their most valuable tool. What greater victory than turning American servicemen against the United States?

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[82] McDaniel, *Scars and Stripes*, 48.

CHAPTER III

PHYSICAL CONDITION AND THE ABILITY TO RESIST

> The only real security we have is the certainty that we're equipped to handle whatever happens to us. Too often we try to build strength through position, possessions, family or friends, social and religious rituals-all the outer trappings by which we form our identities. Stripped of them all, we have to draw from what is left: our basic sense of identity as human beings. From there true security is born.
>
> Gerald Coffee[1]

The physical condition and health of an individual prisoner had a great influence on his ability to resist communist indoctrination and in North Vietnam was directly related to interrogation. Despite different living conditions and circumstances both the Korean and Vietnam POWs suffered horrific physical ailments. In Korean camps, suffering was largely due to environment, diet and apathy on the part of camp officials. In Vietnam, exposure to the environment and poor diet contributed to common health problems but these were compounded by the injuries inflicted by torturers. The two groups reacted to their situations very differently. Logically, a healthy prisoner with a clear mind should be able to expend more energy on resistance than an injured prisoner suffering constant pain. But how did physical health affect prisoner's resistance to indoctrination?

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[1] Coffee, *Beyond Survival*, 59.

The Korean Experience

Soldiers suffered great hardships during their initial confinement in the Korean War. The first objective of North Korean and Chinese troops was to strip the new, healthy American prisoners of all their supplies including overcoats and boots.[2] As the North Korean guards and enemy soldiers acquired new coats and good quality boots the American prisoners were left with very little protection against the harsh winters. To aggravate this situation the prisoners suffered through "death marches" as they were moved to permanent camps. Dressed inadequately for the snow-covered ground, POW Sergeant Lloyd Pate described days spend sitting in snow filled ditches with no food or water except snow.[3] At night the prisoners marched deeper into enemy territory because this was the safest time to travel.[4] The men were fed a minimal amount of frozen grain or rice and suffered from exhaustion because falling asleep could mean freezing to death.[5] As the weak servicemen began to fall behind the strong supported them, but many could not survive the tortuous journey.[6] Captain Paul O'Dowd reported that of 337 men on his death march to Bean Camp only 20 survived.[7]

Although harsh treatment was the norm for servicemen captured along the front lines, there were exceptions. In 1953 the Chinese People's Committee for World Peace

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[2] Sommers, *The Korean Story,* 1.

[3] Pate, *Reactionary!,* 28-29.

[4] Ibid., 34.

[5] Ibid., 30-31.

[6] Sommers, *The Korean Story,* 1.

[7] OCB, "Operation Brainwash," 10

published a book titled *United Nations POWs in Korea*. Throughout the book numerous personal accounts by POWs attribute kindness and fair treatment the their captors. Sgt. George A. Stanley of Paulsbo, Washington wrote,

> I was injured in my right knee and left shoulder. During my futile attempt to escape being taken captive, I severely froze my right foot and suffered frostbite in my right hand. Immediately following my capture I was taken to a warm Korean house. Here they removed my boots and attended to my feet and treated me with whatever medical facilities were available.[8]

Stanley was then taken to a hospital where he reported good treatment for twenty days until he was well enough to continue the trip to a POW camp.[9] Other POWs also provided similar personal accounts of medical treatment immediately after initial capture. Although the Chinese publication presents this behavior as the norm, it was likely a calculated attempt by the Koreans to produce such stories for positive reporting.

While adequate medical attention was the exception for the average Army or Marine Corps POW, the situation was different for captured airmen. Most pilots were injured in the process of ejection. One captured Air Force captain suffered two broken ankles. Because he was unable to move he was easily captured.[10] The North Koreans transported him on a stretcher and did not attempt to blindfold him or tie him up.[11] After

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[8] *United Nations POWs in Korea* (Chinese People's Committee for World Peace, 1953) 4.

[9] Ibid., 4.

[10] Ward M. Millar, *In the Valley of the Shadow* (New York: David McKay Company Inc., 1955) 30.

[11] Ibid., 40-41.

a short time he was given a shot to dull the pain and his ankles were set in splints.[12] After hours of interrogation he requested and was granted a sleeping pill.[13] Eventually the officer was transported to a hospital where he was treated and his ankles were set in casts.[14] Pilots were valuable sources of secret information and the North Koreans wanted to protect their important prisoners.

As the men from death marches arrived at permanent camps Pate commented that "we must have looked like a bunch of walking dead."[15] But the prisoners at the camp before Pate's group arrived looked worse.[16] One former prisoner, Sgt. Raymond Frazier, later described his experience through a fictional character, Buck. When Buck arrived at a new camp he described the prisoners in the camp as "walking dead." "Their eyes were listless, even glazed. Their faces were pinched and of a chalky cadaverous color… their cheeks and eye sockets were hollow."[17]

Pate was fortunate to have a medic captured with his unit.[18] Captured medical personnel held at a camp named "Death Valley" reported that they were permitted to establish a hospital after their arrival. The hospital was located in a building with three rooms for the sick and wounded and one room for the doctors and medics. At one time

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[12] Ibid., 35-36.
[13] Ibid., 46-47.

[14] Ibid., 70-72.

[15] Pate, *Reactionary!*, 30.

[16] Ibid., 53.

[17] Polk, *Korean War*, 25-26.

[18] Pate, *Reactionary!*, 28.

the hospital housed 10-15 medical personnel. The doctors were provided some basic medical supplies such as scissors and gauze.[19]

After the establishment of the Death Valley hospital the camp officials changed their policy. Doctors, always officers, were not allowed to stay in the hospital. Doctors were segregated from other prisoners because they held the status of officers. Despite this change, the American doctors still held sick call for the American enlisted men and kept medical records.[20] Praising the work of American doctors in the camps a former POW stated that, "all they had for medication was a bedside manner and, come to think of it, not a single bed."[21] After 1951 one American doctor was allowed to act as dentist and one as a hygiene officer.[22] Following this segregation, Chinese doctors oversaw rounds for the seriously ill within the camp.[23]

While American medical officers practiced in hospitals they worked closely with Chinese and North Korean doctors, pharmacists and nurses. Captain Alexander Boyson worked as a medical liaison between POWs and a North Korean doctor and pharmacist. Boyson, a medical doctor, spoke with the patients, made a diagnosis and recommended a

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[19] Sommers, *The Korean Story,* 2.

[20] Ibid., 3.

[21] David F. MacGhee, Maj. USAF, "In Korea's Hell Camps: Some of Us Didn't Crack – Here is the story of raw, stubborn courage that should make you proud to be an American," *Colliers*, January 22, 1954, 84.

[22] Sommers, *The Korean Story,* 5.

[23] "Operation Big Switch Medical Intelligence Processing," The Papers of General Mark W. Clark, The Archive and Museum of the Citadel, Charleston, S.C. 6.

course of action to the North Korean officials responsible for the hospital.[24] According to one POW report the Chinese prison commanders refused the POWs access to a nearby hospital until after a bombing raid on the camp produced a significant number of injuries. Still, Captain Paul O'Dowd did not believe the Chinese asked the North Korean doctors to come to the camp but they came voluntarily.[25] Although a lack of training may have rendered the enemy doctors less qualified to aid POW patients, most American medics did not report problems working with these doctors.

According to propagandistic reports produced by the Chinese, sick prisoners were provided a special diet, and intravenous therapy and inoculations were available.[26] Pfc. William K. Dillon wrote of an operation that was performed on several POWs. "The doctors have operated on several GI's for appendicitis....All the boys who took the operation are doing fine, some of my buddies have completely recovered from their sickness and gone to the compound."[27] Other POWs reported treatments, medicines and equipment like those found in the United States.[28] Former POW doctors reported that those prisoners who spent time in hospitals were likely progressives, prisoners working for the communists, who took the place of more needy patients.[29]

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[24] Ibid., 11.

[25] O'Dowd, "Operation Brainwash," 13.

[26] *United Nations POW's in Korea*, 34-35.

[27] Ibid., 34.

[28] Ibid., 38.

[29] "Operation Big Switch Medical Intelligence Processing," 6-7.

Many illnesses were common throughout the camp system and among most prisoners. After their release, medical personnel reported that one hundred percent of the prisoners had suffered from dysentery, severe weight loss and injury from exposure to cold weather. Frostbite on hands and feet were treated on most former prisoners after their return to the United States.[30] Others suffered from hepatitis, bronchitis, nutritional edema, pellagra and pneumonia.[31]

Many of these illnesses occurred as a result of poor sanitation. As one prisoner reported "There was filth all over the place, in the rooms, on the ground, on the porches."[32] Many prisoners were so sick and weak they did not possess the energy to walk outdoors to the outhouse.[33] Staff Sergeant Thomas Gaylets wrote, "We had no showers, no sinks, no place to wash except in the streams."[34] Such conditions led to a breeding ground for lice and bugs.[35] To combat this problem sanitation committees were created. In the officers' camp a doctor was placed in charge of inspecting latrines, bunks, clothing and kitchen supplies. After Operation Little Switch the camp commanders provided mosquito netting for beds, window covers, new latrines and bunk beds.[36]

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[30] Psychological Strategy Board, "Report of Special Ad Hoc Committee," 1953, Eisenhower Library, Psychological Strategy Board Central Files Series.

[31] Sommers, *The Korean Story* 3.

[32] Pate, *Reactionary!*, 55.

[33] Ibid., 55.

[34] Spiller, *American POWs in Korea,* 21.

[35] Ibid., 28.

[36] "Operation Big Switch Medical Intelligence Processing," 11.

Starvation was a serious problem. Pate "saw men who were well over six feet tall and couldn't have weighed a good hundred pounds."[37] Food was supplied irregularly. Sometimes one meal a day and the next day three meals.[38] A poor diet deficient in Vitamin B caused many to suffer from vision problems.[39] Both guards and prisoners suffered night blindness during the winter when fresh vegetables were scarce.[40] Dysentery also resulted from improperly cooked food such as soybeans.[41] Staple food items included rice and turnips.[42] Sergeant Walter G. Adelmann wrote a letter to a newspaper after his return to the United States and stated that "to be a prisoner of war is to know hunger. Hunger that forces you to eat anything and everything available...black stale bread made from straw dust, watery soup infested with worms and made from garbage, rotten potatoes and turnips dug from the muddy fields, and, if you are lucky, hot water to wash it all down."[43]

According to an intelligence report issued by the Secretary of Defense and sent to Allen Dulles, Director of the CIA, much of the food served in prison camps

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[37] Pate, *Reactionary!*, 54.

[38] Ibid., 57.

[39] Sommers, *The Korean Story*, 5.

[40] Spiller, *American POWs in Korea*, 9.

[41] Ibid., 8.

[42] Ibid., 34.

[43] Ibid., 35.

was better than North Korean civilians received.[44] In one camp the mess committee worked to improve meals and received approval for POWs to serve as cooks, and, as one POW reported, "the good news was, it became more like stateside."[45] Meat was very rarely available but when it was the guards wanted to make sure that the Americans appreciated it. When American cooks attempted to throw away rotten fish the Chinese insisted that when meat was provided it would be eaten.[46]

American doctors in the camps kept records as accurately as possible. Causes of deaths were reported as often as possible but often the recorded cause was "give-up-itis."[47] A prisoner would develop the "500 mile stare," deciding to quit eating bathing and talking.[48] Major William E. Mayer, an Army psychiatrist and expert on brainwashing, blamed this new psychological warfare for the extraordinary cases of "give-up-itis." "All too often the prisoner lost even his will to live. He would crawl off in a corner, refuse to eat and – without having any disease whatever – simply die."[49]

Most prisoners provided little help to their fellow inmates. Perhaps some of this could be explained as the success of the communists in their efforts to breed suspicion and distrust among the prisoners, but many reported an attitude of "dog eat dog," "every

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[44] Secretary of Defense, "Background Information Summary," 1953 Eisenhower Library, Psychological Strategy Board.

[45] *United Nations POWs in Korea*, 10-11.

[46] Spiller, *American POWs in Korea*, 55.

[47] Sommers, *The Korean Story*, 9.

[48] MacGhee, *In Koreas Hell Camps*, 85.

[49] "Interview with Maj. William E. Mayer, U.S. Army Expert: Why Did Many GI Captives Cave In?" 57.

man for himself."[50] One former POW was court-martialed upon his return home on charges that he "put outside of the hut some people who were sick, the hut being their only protection against the cold, and these people subsequently died." In debriefings men attributed this phenomenon to the expectation that sick men were going to die.[51] Men became numb to the death all around them and failed to work as a unit to increase the survival rate.

Focused on their own survival, many prisoners were labeled Progressives. Progressives were often viewed not as true followers of communism but as opportunists looking to make their life as easy as possible. Two types of progressives existed. The first group actively assisted the communists in the indoctrination or running of the camp. The second group of progressives did not take an active role in camp life but they put up no resistance to communist ideas.[52] In some cases progressives received better meals and medical attention.[53] With a self-centered approach to the camp experience, prisoners were left without the encouragement and leadership to do what was best for the entire group. By becoming Progressives prisoners found a way to increase their own survival odds.

In contrast to the high mortality rate in Korean prisoner of war camps, forty-three percent of the POW population died in captivity, the death rate in Vietnam prison camps

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[50] Ibid., 58.

[51] Ibid., 58.

[52] "POW Experiences," 6.

[53] Ibid., 10.

was relatively low.[54] This is surprising given the similar nutritional problems experienced by both groups, the higher percentage of prisoners injured at the time of their initial capture and the compound problem of physically debilitating torture inflicted in Vietnamese camps.

The Vietnam Experience

The Vietnam prisoner's initial experience was fundamentally different from the majority of Korean prisoners simply because of his military job. The initial capture of most Vietnam prisoners resembled the capture of pilots in Korea. Pilots possessed valuable military information and they were most useful when kept alive. However, despite this desire to keep captured pilots alive, medical attention often was inadequate or non-existent.

Most men were in desperate need of medical attention when they first arrived in Hanoi, having suffered injuries either when their plane was hit or during the process of ejection. John Burling recalled being x-rayed "after about twenty-five or thirty days for back pain he experienced after his ejection. "A few days later, a guy we called 'Spot'...told me that my back was broken and that I should be careful. That was the end of any kind of medical treatment."[55] After approximately six months of imprisonment Paul Kari was visited by a Vietnamese doctor with "a handful of cotton swabs and a jar of wintergreen."[56] Medicines and supplies were not available for most prisoners.

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[54] Leche, *Broken Soldiers*, 2.

[55] Borling, Oral History, 14.

The suffering of prisoner Sam Johnson provides an enlightening description of how medical attention was used to manipulate. After his initial capture Johnson was told to write a letter to his wife in order to receive medical treatment. Conceding to this demand Johnson was then taken to the home of a doctor. After being given an anesthetic the doctor and two aides pulled and pushed to try and set the two breaks in Johnson's arm. Johnson wrote "I sensed that the doctor was trying to do something for me, but I was sure he had no idea what he should do." When the doctor had done his best he set Johnson's arm in a cast.[57]

After arrival at the Hanoi Hilton Johnson was told by his interrogator, Rabbit, that arrangements could be made for Johnson to see a surgeon for his broken arm. While transporting him to the permanent camp, Johnson's arm had been re-broken and the cast had become useless.[58] Johnson refused to see a surgeon after hearing horror stories from other prisoners and requested only a cast. Rabbit was not pleased with this answer and pressed the issue during several interrogations.[59] After several days Johnson was taken from his cell and transported to a hospital. At the hospital Johnson's arm was x-rayed and re-set. The new cast was applied around his entire upper body, securely positioning his injured arm across his stomach. The large cast was soon unbearable in the heat and humidity of Vietnam. As Johnson described it, "for the next six months I would be

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[56] Kari, Oral History, 47.

[57] Johnson, *Captive Warrior*, 47-49.

[58] Ibid., 66

[59] Ibid., 93-94.

encased like a turtle in a plaster shell."[60] Johnson won a battle by successfully standing his ground and refusing surgery.

Other prisoners endured similar circumstances. James Stockdale landed on Vietnamese soil with several broken bones and although doctors tried to set his leg, they were unsuccessful. The lack of treatment actually may have saved many men from undue suffering because Vietnamese doctors and nurses were poorly trained.[61] Air Force Major Tom Sterling was forced to make a propaganda tape in exchange for medical treatment. His ejection left him with two broken legs, but even after surgery he experienced difficulty walking.[62]

Prisoners also suffered serious injuries during the interrogation process. The captors used a variety of methods to bring the prisoners to the edge of the worst possible human suffering without causing death. A rope trick described by Paul Kari was a common form of torture. Hands and arms would be tied as tightly as possible behind the back and then rotated over the prisoner's head. This was used as an incentive to make prisoners write letters of confession, but after the torture Kari could only reply "but, I can't use my right arm at all."[63] This and other forms of torture caused severe swelling of limbs, and sometimes extended periods of paralysis. For some prisoners, it was months or years before they fully recovered from a torture session. According to Thomas Norris,

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[60] Ibid., 94-96.

[61] Rochester and Kiley, *Honor Bound,* 126-131.

[62] McDaniel, *Scars and Stripes*, 45.

[63] Kari, Oral History, 42.

torture combined with "not getting enough sleep, you don't have any food or water...it's degrading...and that's what wears on people."[64]

Deplorable conditions and malnutrition were the cause of many ailments and medical treatment for these was inconsistent. During some periods, medicines and vitamins were administered regularly, and at others they were provided or withheld based on the conduct of the prisoner.[65] Dick Dutton, suffering from 105 boils and an extremely high fever, found relief in the vitamins when they were made available.[66]

Paul Kari blames lack of food for the loss of center vision in both of his eyes. When he complained to the Vietnamese about this, they provided him with a large bucket of peanuts because they believed he was deficient in Vitamin B. This was not the correct diagnosis, however, and Kari's eyes continued to deteriorate resulting in irreparable damage.[67] Ben Pollard reported terrible conditions at the Son Tay camp during late 1968. Pollard estimated that prisoners received no more than 900 calories a day and no protein or fruit. "You'd peek out a hole and see people working in the yard collapse. You would faint in your room from just standing up, and when you got up again, there would be stars in your eyes. We were starving to death."[68]

Basic food rations were inconsistent and meager. Most prisoners were fed once mid-morning and once in the afternoon. A watery soup was made from pumpkins,

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[64] Thomas Norris, Interview by Steve Maxner, 2001. Transcribed Recording. The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, 24.`

[65] Stuart and Kiley, *Honor Bound,* 296.

[66] Pollard, Oral History, 51.

[67] Kari, Oral History, 47-48.

[68] Pollard, Oral History, 48.

turnips, kohlrabi or a mixture of "slimy greens."[69] Occasionally the meal included a small amount of rind or a vegetable fried in pig fat. Any small amount of meat was "cause for celebration." The final portion of the meal consisted of rice. A small pot of sterilized water was provided each day.[70] The only reprieve from the poor diet was for holidays. One Christmas Everett Alvarez and his cellmates were served soup with potatoes, hot turkey, rice balls, coffee and a small amount of beer.[71] A special holiday meal became routine through the long years of captivity.

Jerry Coffee wrote that he "learned early on to swallow the rice without chewing because of the gravel and grit that would crunch hard on the teeth."[72] Edward Mechenbier broke his teeth eating rocks in his rice and his dental care consisted of "six guys holding you down and the guy would go in with a pair of pliers and pull out one of your molars."[73] Most prisoners suffered from worms, parasites, and boils for which the Vietnamese failed to provide medical attention.[74]

Despite rules against communicating and a widely used policy of isolation, prisoners were dedicated to helping one another survive. POW Ben Pollard recalled the night early in his confinement when he was suffering from a severe case of dysentery. A

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[69] Coffee, *Beyond Survival,* 84.

[70] Ibid., 84-85.

[71] Alvarez and Pitch, *Chained Eagle,* 137-138.

[72] Coffee, *Beyond Survival,* 85.

[73] Edward Mechenbier. Interview by James C. Hasdorff, 1991. Transcribed Tape Recording, 30. The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock.

[74] Beckman, Oral History 36.

Navy commander, Mel Moore, in the next cell yelled "Bao, Cao," meaning that he needed to see an English speaking guard.[75] The Navy commander asked to help Pollard and the guards conceded, letting him into Pollard's cell. "I was as near death as you could possibly be, but Mel started nursing me back to health." After much encouragement and nursing from his fellow prisoner Pollard began to improve.[76]

Later Pollard would be in a position to help another prisoner. Pollard and other prisoners encouraged a Navy commander who had spent four years in solitary confinement to communicate with those around him. Pollard and the other POWs in the cellblock quickly learned that their fellow prisoner did not trust anyone and was refusing the milk they were able to pass to him. The commander was also refusing the bean curds and vitamins provided by the Vietnamese. Finally, Pollard told the Commander, "You've got to change your resistance posture. The Vietnamese don't want anything anymore. In fact, they want to get you out alive. They're short on prisoners. A lot of pilots didn't make it, and now they need live bodies."[77]

Poor sanitation was also a consistent source of illness. Prisoners shared cells with rats, roaches, ants, and numerous other insects. Coffee recalled chasing rats off the food that had been left for him in his cell.[78] The afternoon meal sometimes did not arrive until after dark and on these occasions prisoners often found themselves eating live bugs.[79]

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[75] Coffee, *Beyond Survival,* 79.

[76] Pollard, Oral History, 58.

[77] Ibid., 58-59.

[78] Coffee, *Beyond Survival,* 85.

[79] Alverez and Pitch, *Chained Eagle,* 165.

Many prisoners suffered from a lack of appetite either caused by illness or unappealing food.[80]

Toilets for men in solitary confinement consisted of rusty buckets. Johnson's first bucket was so "rusted that it crumbled when my hand touched it." This would be his toilet for five years.[81] To protect themselves from the jagged rusty edges of the buckets prisoners learned to sit on their rubber sandals. The buckets were emptied once a day and a foul odor always permeated the cells.[82] When prisoners were allowed to leave their cells to use the restroom, they were shown to holes in raised cement blocks. The latrine areas were also infested with rats and roaches.[83]

As the return of prisoners drew near, the North Vietnamese improved camp conditions. Paul Kari believes an accurate account of his weight at one point during his captivity was 103 pounds. At his thinnest, he was able to touch his thumb and forefinger around his flexed biceps. Shortly before release the North Vietnamese instituted a program to increase the weight of their prisoners. Bread and other foods became plentiful. Kari left the Hanoi Hilton weighing 133 pounds.[84] Outdoor recreational activities such as basketball allowed the men to increase their muscle tone and skin color. The men who returned to the United States in 1973 were not the same healthy men who

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[80] Alvarez and Pitch, *Chained Eagle,* 165.

[81] Johnson, *Captive Warrior,* 71.

[82] Alvarez and Pitch, *Chained Eagle,* 164-165.

[83] Coffee, *Beyond Survival,* 86.

[84] Kari, Oral History, 45-46.

had been fighting for their country, nor did they provide an accurate image of their years of suffering.

Conclusion

American prisoners of war in North Korea and North Vietnam suffered a myriad of illnesses brought on by malnutrition, poor hygiene and sanitation, exposure and a lack of, or inadequate, medical care. Many prisoners of these wars suffered from dysentery, respiratory problems, loss of vision, pneumonia, boils and other common illnesses. Despite the many similarities, two factors set these experiences apart. First, the addition of torture brought an extra physical burden to the prisoners held in North Vietnam. Second, the response of both groups of prisoners to the physical hardships differed greatly.

Two factors influenced the reaction of the American POWs in North Korea to their physical condition and their fate. The prisoners held in North Korea faced tremendous difficulties and hardships, and as medical doctors noted, succumbed to "give-up-itis." With the exception of American doctors, prisoners became numb to the death they witnessed all around them. In some instances fellow prisoners attempted to help the weak or injured but many of the healthy prisoners became too weak themselves.[85] When prisoners reached the permanent camps they were greeted by starving prisoners and many of the healthy were assigned to the burial detail.[86] One prisoner reported waking up one

[85] Pate, *Reactionary!* 51.
[86] Ibid., 53-54.

morning between the bodies of two dead men.[87] With death a constant and daily companion, the shock diminished and prisoners accepted this as a reality of prison life. Fighting communist indoctrination and even death required effort and with the overwhelming number of men dying the effort did not appear worth it.

The second factor aiding the apathy towards death was the communist plan to turn prisoners against one another. Camp commanders brilliantly executed plans to breed distrust among the prison ranks. Indoctrinators and guards easily created suspicion that one prisoner was informing on another or receiving special treatment as some form of reward.[88] The prison camp became a place where prisoners protected only themselves. This environment eventually led to stealing. Prisoners stole food, clean clothing that was drying outside, and many other personal items that fellow prisoners were able to obtain.[89] Prisoners in North Korea lacked a positive "buddy system."[90] As Capt. O'Dowd noted, "instead of being a more or less firmly knit organization with underground control, each prisoner compound became a group of individuals, who no longer dared to act collectively."[91]

The Vietnam experience created a uniquely different response among the prison population. Despite restrictions forbidding communicating, or perhaps because of these

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[87] Ibid., 57.

[88] "Brainwashing: A Real Danger," The Papers of General Mark Clark, The Museum and Archive of The Citadel, Charleston, S.C. 8.

[89] Ibid., 8.

[90] William E. Nair, "Brainwashing: The Ultimate Weapon," 1.

[91] O'Dowd, "Operation Brainwash," 15-16.

restrictions, Vietnam POWs developed a close personal bond with prisoners they had never seen. Through their communication network they offered each other encouragement during times of torture. The senior officers issued orders and regulated behavior.

While senior officer Rob Risner was a resident of the Hanoi Hilton he found a small amount of time each day to offer encouragement to the men in the cells around him while another man carefully watched for a guard to return. During one session a new inmate, Lieutenant Gerald Coffee, expressed doubts about his ability to withstand the torture. Risner encouraged him to resist until he could resist no more. He assured Coffee that each prisoner experienced torture and understood the guilt that came with giving in to their captors. In the first months, Risner attempted to prepare the men for what he knew was ahead and give them the courage and the strength to withstand it.[92] He encouraged a faith in God by saying, "Remember Jerry, our Lord will never ask us to endure more than we are able to endure."[93]

It was essential for the men to comfort and lift one another's spirits during the times of torture. Through communication they were able to share the burden of resisting the Vietnamese. Prisoners encouraged one another, cried with one another and shared their failures during these critical times.[94] Alvarez and his cellmate Tom Barrett spent several months in a cell next to a torture chamber. While the Vietnamese kept Navy

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[92] Coffee, *Beyond Survival,* 138-139.

[93] Ibid., 212.

[94] Ibid., 189.

Lieutenant Ed Davis for an entire week, Alvarez and Barrett tapped out messages of encouragement and support after the Vietnamese had left him each night. One message, "Hang in there Buddy. We're with you all the way," truly demonstrated the strong bond and depth of feeling shared by these captives. Later Davis would send out a message saying, "sometimes a little pain is good for you." Such an open demonstration of courage inspired the prisoners around him.[95]

Food, a constant source of contention for North Korean prisoners, was dealt with in a unique way by the prison leadership of Camp Unity. Myron Donald remembers meal times in Camp Unity as a point of heated debate. "Who would ever dream you'd fight about a bowl of soup made out of weeds? But it got to be a huge hassle." Often the soup had not been equally divided among all the bowls. The SRO developed a method of distributing soup bowls based on playing cards. Each man was given one card and before each meal the extra cards were shuffled and laid out in front of the bowls of soup. Each man took the bowl with the matching card.[96]

Men also learned to work together. Prisoners with injured cellmates worked tirelessly to ensure that his fellow POW survived. Prisoners resorted to force-feeding prisoners and even insults in an attempt to halt the apathy that overtook many prisoners of the Vietnamese. Prisoners would often slip into depression after torture, often because they were critical of their own performance after conceding to the Vietnamese. Cellmates and neighbors worked hard to communicate with fellow prisoners in need of

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[95] Alvarez and Pitch, *Chained Eagle*, 163.

[96] Myron L. Donald. Interview by Dr. James C. Hasdorff, 1992. Transcribed Tape Recording, 36-37. The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock.

encouragement. Neighbors attempted to draw them out when they did not wish to communicate. Jerry Coffee worked with a neighbor until he finally decided to insult the prisoner's college football team in an effort to evoke some type of response. He got his response in the form of an expletive followed by "I'll see you at the Coliseum this fall and bet you a hundred bucks on the big game." Coffee's neighbor was back in the system.[97]

In a situation where many prisoners remained in isolation for many months or years the Vietnam POWs created a community environment, which led the men into intense personal relationships. Although many prisoners would not see each other face-to-face, they came to care for one another and worked for the survival of the group. Those prisoners who did have roommates worked for the best interests of the group. With help from roommates or encouragement from faceless voices, sick and injured prisoners consistently resisted indoctrination and confessions to the best of their ability.

Physical health is necessary for basic survival, and in a prisoner of war situation, necessary for the mental clarity needed to combat indoctrination. The self-centered positions taken by many of the American POWs in North Korea undermined their own health and their ability to stand as a united front against communist indoctrination. Clearly, teamwork and a community attitude, as described in Article IV of the Code of Conduct, benefited those prisoners held in North Vietnam. Looking out for the health and welfare of fellow prisoners strengthened the group and each individual's ability to resist. Prisoners in Vietnam lived according to the statement "I will keep faith with my

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[97] Coffee, *Beyond Survival*, 154.

fellow prisoners. I will give no information or take part in any action which might be harmful to my comrades."[98]

[98] *Code of the U.S. Fighting Force*, 4-14.

CHAPTER IV

PRISONER RELATIONSHIPS AND THE ABILITY TO RESIST

> The strongest bonds of camaraderie and friendship are born and nurtured in shared adversity. Sadly, it seems that only through adversity do we acquire understanding, acceptance, and forgiveness of self, and then are able to apply them to others as well. The connections between us are solidified when we are willing to share without censure our own fear and weakness, courage and strength, and ultimately the joy of mutual triumph.
>
> Gerald Coffee[1]

As noted in Chapter III, there was a sharp difference in the community in prison camp experiences in Korea and North Vietnam. In Korea the desire to protect one's own physical existence outweighed the health and safety of the POW unit. Many prisoners avoided emotional attachment just as basic survival needs became paramount. By contrast, in the close community of Vietnam POWs, individuals depended on the emotional support of other POWs for their basic survival. In their effort to resist, the Vietnam POWs guarded each other's physical as well mental health. Developing relationships among fellow prisoners was key to resistance and survival.

The Korean Experience

Korean prisoners were allowed relative freedom within the camp compound. They lived in large groups and could walk around the camp and visit a variety of

[1] Coffee, *Beyond Survival,* 184.

facilities. With the exception of enlisted men talking with officers, communication was not widely restricted. The openness of this camp system would appear to be the perfect environment for the development of a close community of prisoners who drew strength from one another through difficult times. Oddly this was not the case. "We cannot underestimate the importance of the fact that 80% of PWs neither resisted or participated, but reacted passively and by withdrawing."[2] Most prisoner chose to suffer and endure their time in captivity by avoiding the personal interactions that often resulted from resisting or participating with the communists.

Reports published shortly after the return of the Korean prisoners identified these categories of men: Progressives or Participators, the Middle Group, and Resisters or Reactionaries. For the purpose of clarity, Participator and Resister will be used throughout this paper to describe these groups. As these three groups emerged during indoctrination sessions, their interactions showed no evidence of "esprit de corps."[3] The most antagonistic relationship existed between the two smallest and most extreme groups, the Participators and the Resisters.[4] The Middle Group comprised the majority and, as the name suggests, these prisoners avoided the polarized groups and caused their captors few problems.

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[2] "POW Experiences."

[3] The Department of the Army and George Washington University Human Resources Research Office. *Factors Related to the Collaboration and Resistance Behavior of U.S. Army PW's in Korea.* December, 1956; Pate, *Reactionary!*, 68.

[4] Ibid., 90.

Participators played a role in communist propaganda to varying degrees and in a variety of ways. Thirty-nine percent of the prison population earned the label Participator when they signed "communist propaganda petitions." Twenty-two percent of the entire population made propaganda reports while sixteen percent "performed full time propaganda duties." Clearly defining a Participator is difficult, but even in the most extreme cases sixteen percent is a significant number of men.[5]

As might be expected, the Resisters, approximately five percent of the prison population, faced the harshest treatment at the hands of their captors. Resisters were those prisoners who refused to accept communist indoctrination and worked against their captors. During indoctrination sessions, Resisters earned the contempt of camp officials by stubbornly voicing resistance to the communist propaganda, and were isolated for intensive treatment. The Resister prisoners were closely watched during indoctrination and questioned extensively for information.[6] Sgt. Lloyd Pate was part of a special Resister group that was kept near camp headquarters. The camp administrators clearly wanted to keep a close eye on the troublesome group, but Pate noted that the arrangement also had benefits for the prisoners. "We could keep an eye on headquarters and see who went in there."[7]

Keeping track of the Participators and who might be informing was key to the separation of these two groups.

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[5] Ibid., 39.

[6] Pate, *Reactionary!* 78.

[7] Ibid., 78.

> Throughout the thirty-two months that I was a prisoner things we discussed would invariably get out to our captors. It resulted in people getting mighty suspicious of one another and they broke up into little groups, going around together with people they thought they could trust, and a lot of people came under suspicion and it turned into a pretty vicious thing, actually, before we got out of there.[8]

Suspicion was a valuable tool in the hands of the Chinese and North Koreans. The prisoners were cautious about trusting fellow POWs. The ability to observe contact between prisoners and prison officials greatly enhanced the Resisters' effectiveness.

Resister groups demonstrated the most unity and cohesiveness. As Pate noted, the one thing all Resisters had in common was that "they all just hated the Chinese and weren't going to take indoctrination when it was rammed down their throats."[9] This hatred of the Chinese and North Koreans was followed by hatred for Participators. This common unifying hatred created the difficult circumstances, which they all shared. A study conducted by George Washington University shortly after the POWs returned showed that 91% of Resisters cared moderately or greatly for their fellow prisoners. However, the authors of the study qualified this figure by noting that the percentage probably only referred to fellow Resisters or those prisoners that they believed could be influenced to resist.[10]

In contrast to their care for each other, Resisters' hatred of Participators led to physical violence in some cases. Resisters hoped, in most cases, to use threats to reform the behavior of Participators but when threats failed, the Resisters were not afraid to use

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[8] Lech, *Broken Soldiers,* 155

[9] Pate, *Reactionary!,* 79.

[10] *Factors Related to the Collaboration and Resistance,* 90.

beatings to bring about change. "Most of them straightened out and became soldiers America could be proud of. Some we had to work over twice before they realized we meant what we said."[11] In some camps the goal of the Resisters was "simply to physically abuse the Participators" and 22% of prisoners reported knowledge of these abuses.[12]

Participators, in contrast, were a less cohesive group. For most Participators it is appropriate to say that their participation was based primarily on personal gain and immediate comfort rather than the adoption of communist ideals.[13] It is most likely that participating in such groups as "Peace Committees," rather than signifying some ideological commitment to communism, simply was Particpators' attempt to demonstrate "their willingness to do the captor's bidding."[14] It is easy to conclude that Participators cared little for their fellow Participators and even less for members of the Middle or Resister groups. Participators faced fewer hardships and pressures, reducing the need for prisoners to rely on each other for support.

Participators found many ways to collaborate with the enemy. Participators worked in libraries, spoke regularly with Chinese or North Korean guards and published in major magazines and newspapers such as *The Shanghai News* and the *Chinese Monthly Review*. North Koreans and Chinese broadcast speeches and pro-communist songs recorded by Participators on the radio and camp loudspeakers.

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[11] Pate, *Reactionary!* 90-91.

[12] *Factors Related to the Collaboration and Resistance*, 90.

[13] Pate, *Reactionary!*, 68.

[14] *Factors Related to the Collaboration and Resistance*, 95.

While Participators received more lenient treatment, the benefits were not great. Pate, a strong Resister, noted that "they never got any big reward for anything they did – maybe a handful of peanuts or cigarettes, a few spoons of the food the Chinese didn't feel like eating, a few balls of hard candy, or a shirt some slopehead got tired of wearing. And yet for these measly things some of the Progressives would have sold their souls."[15] In the act of "selling their souls" Participators also severed their ties with fellow American prisoners who stood against communist indoctrination.

Despite the divisions within the camp, many participated in sporting activities within their Resister or Participator group. While competitive group sports would lead to team bonding in many situations, that rarely occurred in the prison camps of Korea. According to statements by American servicemen found in Chinese propaganda, athletic activity provided those healthy enough to participate the opportunity to interact with other prisoners. Men played volleyball, basketball, baseball, and even went swimming.[16] One POW reported having time to read, do laundry or "anything to keep busy."[17] There is no evidence to show that athletic activity, available when weather permitted, produced widespread bonding that is typical of team sports. If bonds were formed among teammates, it is unlikely, given the attitudes of distrust and everyman for himself, that they extended beyond the playing field.

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[15] Pate, *Reactionary!*, 64.

[16] *United Nations POW's in Korea*, 14-15.

[17] "POW Account of Imprisonment and Chinese Forces," The Papers of General Mark Clark, The Citadel, Charleston, S.C., 6.

Despite the lack of unity within camps, some men were able to bond with others. One group of men made plans for the future. One POW, a car salesman, took names and orders for cars. All of the written orders were left behind during repatriation, but many of the prisoners remembered when they returned home and bought cars from their fellow prisoner. Thoughts of the future provided the men with hope in a difficult situation.[18]

Resisters found unity in playing practical jokes on their captors. One camp had a particularly "obnoxious brainwasher" who consistently charged into the barracks before dawn to turn on lights and rouse the prisoners. In one barrack the prisoners decided to have a little fun with their captor. All thirty-five prisoners collected their belongings and hid outside before the brainwasher arrived. The brainwasher was confused when he found the barracks empty. He left the barracks to look for the prisoners while all the prisoners quietly returned to the barracks and made everything look like normal. When the brainwasher returned they acted like they had been there the entire time.[19]

Crazy Week was a time the Resister prisoners designated to confuse their captors. Prisoners found unity in fun pranks. One prisoner pretended to ride an imaginary bike. The captors were so stunned they would allow the prisoner to "ride" past the sentry and out the prison gate. The prisoner would stop along the road as though he was taking a break and then he would return to the camp.

> Capt. Johnny Thorton, USN, was a helicopter pilot and was always playing tricks. He rode an imaginary motorcycle around camp. The Chinese finally hauled him in and told him they were confiscating his motorcycle. He protested, but they insisted. He had to give up his

[18] Hunter, *Brainwashing*, 144.

[19] Ibid., 148-149.

imaginary motorcycle for a while, but it wasn't long before he had another one.[20]

Other prisoners would enact an entire scene depicting an airplane landing on an aircraft carrier. One man would pretend to be a helicopter; every prisoner wanting to participate had a part.[21] The prisoners did find the ability to work together when they needed to relax and have fun.

Food, important for survival and sadly lacking, became a popular subject for discussion. In a pastime Vietnam POWs would repeat a little more than a decade later, Korea POWs daydreamed about food they missed and what they would eat when they were released. "Mouths would hang open and saliva would flow as someone described covering a juicy piece of ham with peanut butter. One GI recalled speculation about the flavor of bean curry prepared in twenty different ways."[22] Through sharing their hunger and their desire to return home, the prisoners displayed a certain element of vulnerability that can be a uniting force among men who confide in one another.

In one camp a group of officers found ways to keep their minds occupied. The international groups of officers realized they had "turned [their] brains off" in response to indoctrination when they began discussing the weather. They developed a system to keep their minds active. According to Captain Henry Osborne, "the Hispanics taught Spanish; I taught math."[23] Active minds became an important part of survival.

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[20] Spiller, *American POW's in Korea,* 71.

[21] Hunter, *Brainwashing,* 152-153.

[22] Lech, *Broken Soldiers,* 71.

[23] Spiller, *American POW's in Korea,* 70.

Groups and organizations were also formed outside of the communist system. In most camps Resisters formed a group called the KKK, named for the Ku Klux Klan, to organize opposition to Participators. Reports of KKK membership range from thirty to two hundred, but Army documents suggest the smaller number is most accurate. In each camp members of the group were divided into two or three member cells to reduce the likelihood of a Participator infiltrating the group. Members reported three goals. They sought to disrupt camp life, counter indoctrination and prevent collaboration. Despite these goals, the members of the KKK organization remained largely ineffective during their captivity due to their captors' widespread use of informers.[24]

Smaller groups also formed to combat specific problems. True Americans, an anti-communist group, recognized the propaganda value of photographs and encouraged other prisoners the resist having their photograph taken. According to one prisoner, seventy-five percent of 4th Company belonged to True Americans. Some members set fire to a camp building. The sixteen to twenty members of FHA, or Free Hearts of America, worked to keep Participators from "informing and writing pro-communist articles in the camp paper."[25] The twenty men of the Black Dragon organization "intended to burn Chinese supply points and camp buildings" but their plans were never acted upon.[26] Other resistance organizations included the Non-Benedict Arnold Club, the

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[24] *U.S. Prisoners of War in The Korean Operation*, 124-126.

[25] Ibid., 126-127.

[26] Ibid., 126-127.

Cannibal Club and the Un-American Activities Committee.[27] The formation of such groups is consistent with the idea that Resisters worked together and formed stronger bonds.

Creating and exploiting divisions within the prison camps was a primary goal of the communist indoctrinators. Isolating the men and encouraging them to think only of themselves and their personal welfare created a situation where more servicemen became susceptible to communist manipulation. In the instances where small groups were able to unite in trusting relationships they found effective ways to resist indoctrination.

The Vietnam Experience

Unlike the Korean experience, Vietnam POWs faced imprisonment based largely on isolation. Rather than undermining the prisoners' desire and need for a community, the restrictions fueled their determination to work together and survive as a unit. The isolated men did not have the comfort of seeing their fellow POW and drawing strength from physical contact and face-to-face encounters. Stripped of this comfort they quickly recognized the value of contact with fellow Americans experiencing similar circumstances.

Creating a system of communication was essential for the development of the POW community. When prisoners were able to 'speak' to each other, they were able to connect in an intensely personal way. The difficulty of the situation and the danger of communicating led to deep and meaningful relationships. Men were not talking of the

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[27] Ibid.,127.

weather but of life and survival, of hopes and dreams, and occasionally a trivial bit of Americana.[28] The POW community was unique in that many of the men who became close personal friends did not see each other face to face for many years.[29] As the living situation changed in the later years, so did the sense of community as men adjusted to the new accommodations. The difficulty of the situation and the trials experienced by all POWs made communication a necessity and reinforced the unity of the community.

The Vietnamese prohibited communication, which made it necessary for prisoners, who spent much of their time in solitary confinement, to develop a secret communication code.[30] Communication among prisoners of war was strictly against the rules posted in each cell of the camps, which were given such nicknames as the "The Zoo," and "Alcatraz."[31] An old tap system became the primary means of communication between prisoners. Air Force Captain Carlyle Harris remembered the tap code being mentioned during a coffee break at survival school and introduced it into the camp system. Survival school instructors had not taught the tap code because they based their instruction primarily on the Korean War experience in which solitary confinement was unusual. Over the years, prisoners endured severe and sometimes crippling torture to protect their communications, their lifeline. Men suffered broken bones, dislocated

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[28] Johnson, *Captive Warriors*, 165-167.

[29] Ibid., 244-245.

[30] Ibid., 137.

[31] Senate Select Committee. "Debriefing Results – Life in Captivity." n.d., http://www.aiipowmia.com/ssc/ssc.31.htm

shoulders and a variety of other physical injuries inflicted by the Vietnamese.[32] Navy Lieutenant (junior grade) Everett Alvarez believed, however, that the obstacles and dangers involved in keeping the communication lines open only "fueled our morale and stiffened our backbone."[33]

Navy Lieutenant Gerald Coffee received his first communication from senior officer Lieutenant Colonel Robinson Risner while at the "Hanoi Hilton." The spoken conversation was brief; however, Risner had time to instruct Coffee to learn the communication system, which a previous inmate had left etched in the wall of his cell.[34] The tap system consisted of a grid with five letters across and five letters down. To Coffee it would remain a mystery until further explained. The rows were numbered left to right and top to bottom one through five. The system left out the letter K and replaced it with C. To tap a letter a prisoner tapped on the wall the number of the row and then the number of the column. The letter B, for example, would be one tap for the row followed by two taps for the column.[35]

Once a new POW learned the system it could be adapted in various ways. "Vocal taps" were the most sophisticated form and could be heard through coughs, sneezes, or sniffs.[36] Each of these bodily noises represented a number. Prisoners used a

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[32] Coffee, *Beyond Survival,* 141.

[33] Alvarez and Pitch, *Chained Eagle,* 190.

[34] Coffee, *Beyond Survival,* 100.

[35] Bob Smith, "A Tribute to Former Vietnam POW Ted Guy," n.d., http://www.aiipowmia.cm/inter/in042999.htm

[36] Coffee, *Beyond Survival,* 141.

combination of these sounds to form words. Scratches and sweeps of a broom also sent the tap code through the system. The ability to adapt the code provided the prisoners with many new opportunities to communicate and the Vietnamese did not easily recognize the adaptations.[37] Abbreviations for common words allowed prisoners, after much practice, to communicate almost as quickly as they could speak. Over the years they learned to discern their neighbors' various emotions, such as sadness or excitement, simply by listening to variations in their tapping. Coffee remembered knowing if his neighbor had "liked my joke, or if it had bombed, depending on his extemporaneous scratching, drumming with the fingernails, brushing, or light thumping. What was he doing, laughing or groaning? I was really beginning to know." POWs developed an extremely keen sense of hearing, developed their creativity, and soon were able to hear and use the code in a number of ways.[38]

The communication system allowed the captive American servicemen to receive information from the outside world. This became more important the longer the Vietnamese held them captive. The North Vietnamese captured the first prisoner of war in August 1964, and as the war escalated, additional pilots and soldiers became part of the Hanoi prison system. The prisoners sought assurances that the world they had known continued to exist. They asked for updates on the war, and as years passed they

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[37] Tanya Biank, "Ex-POW Denton finds will to ease others' pain," n.d., http://www.pownetwork.org/bios/d/d053.htm

[38] Coffee, *Beyond Survival*, 140.

wanted to know how things had changed in the States and even such trivial information as which team won the last Super Bowl.[39]

Information about new U.S. policies and military accomplishments went a long way to boost the morale of the men as they interpreted positive news as a sign of their impending release. When the Vietnamese first transferred Lieutenant Coffee, captured in early February of 1966, from the Hanoi Hilton to another camp, the other prisoners gave him an overview of the camp layout and procedures. Following this orientation, the prisoners asked Coffee for news of home. They wanted information about family, sports, cars and movies. The men were especially interested in the war effort and Coffee assured the men they should expect to be out within a few months, although he was not so optimistic himself.[40] Cheers could be heard throughout the camps when prisoners heard airplanes flying overhead and occasionally when they dropped bombs. This, of course, only served to reassure the men that the end was near. They would immediately begin tapping "I told you so" messages on the wall and estimating the number of days until they would be on their way home.[41]

Any type of news from the outside was welcome; however, news that reinforced their great faith in the United States was especially effective in cheering the men. Coffee, while staying at Little Vegas, introduced himself to a recently captured inmate in an adjacent cell. The new guy had information about America putting a man on the moon.

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[39] Alvarez and Pitch, *Chained Eagle*, 201.

[40] Coffee, *Beyond Survival*, 147.

[41] Alvarez and Pitch, *Chained Eagle*, 144.

Coffee could not wait to pass along this unbelievably exciting news to the other men, and it served to renew their faith in America. Coffee believed that if America could put a man on the moon they would certainly rescue American servicemen languishing in Vietnamese prisons.[42] After months of solitary confinement, Ted Guy received a roommate and immediately wanted to know about home. How were things in the States? What were new cars like? Fashion? Had America really put a man on the moon?[43]

Trivial news from home could also unify the men. After Coffee had been a part of the prison system for some time, he casually picked up a wadded piece of paper from the ground while out of his cell one day. Later, after closer inspection, he was able to decipher the pinpoint code and the message read, "FNG N DI SA UCLA BT OSU N RB SH" or "A new guy in the Desert Inn says UCLA beat Ohio State in the Rose Bowl." This was a wonderful piece of trivial information from home. The men could cheer and reminisce about the great American pastime of football.[44]

New information from home could bring the men down as well as lift their spirits. Prisoners who arrived in the camps after 1968 brought disturbing news from home and the men became worried. New POWs reported that the anti-war movement was growing and causing trouble back in the States. Everett Alvarez faced the news that his own sister

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[42] Coffee, *Beyond Survival,* 150.

[43] Grant, *Survivors,* 269-270.

[44] Coffee, *Beyond Survival,* 142.

was involved in protesting the war.[45] This was demoralizing news that made it more difficult to maintain faith in the United States government.

During hard times such as this, when morale was low, the men needed encouragement to sustain their hope. Many men relied on the strength of those senior officers who had been held the longest and suffered the most in their early years.[46] Many of the men came to know the prisoners around them as well as they knew themselves, and this personal bond sustained the men through the difficult years. The prisoners would take turns relating the most memorable events in their lives. They told of high school days, college graduations, marriage and children. Each man knew when another received a letter from home when they eagerly tapped out the short message from a mother or wife. The intense environment engendered very strong personal connections and each prisoner learned to detect when another was feeling down or worried.[47] This intensely personal bond felt throughout the POW community was tested in times of trial and uncertainty, as prisoners were needed to uplift and encourage others even as they faced fear.

The prisoners shared common concerns about the life they had been living before their capture. Periodically the Vietnamese would allow the prisoners to read letters from their families. Many letters were never received and those that were had often been written several months, if not an entire year, earlier. In December 1970 Lieutenant

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[45] Alvarez and Pitch, *Chained Eagle*, 234.

[46] Ibid., 246.

[47] Alvarez and Pitch, *Chained Eagle*, 138.

Alvarez received word that his wife, whom he had married only a few months before his capture, had not waited for him but had left him for another man. For more than a year he had waited for a letter from his wife and knowing he had not received a letter, each of the men had agonized with him. When a letter finally arrived, the community of POWs rallied around Alvarez to support him and pull him through the difficult and depressing time. Alvarez believed "those around me were as close to me as my family. They did not have to ask how I felt. They knew with the sureness of instinct." Most of the prisoners were apprehensive, if not truly worried, about what their life would be like when they returned. Would their girlfriends have married someone else? Had their wives remained faithful? Each man was able to empathize with Alvarez.[48]

Vivid imaginations became important to each man and the entire community. Through the use of their imaginations the prisoners escaped the confines of their cell for short periods of time. Christmas was an especially difficult time for all the men as they struggled with memories and thoughts of home. To help lift spirits a tradition developed. They would softly sing carols and reminisce about years past followed by an exchange of gifts. Each man was intimately familiar with the others around him; they knew each other's likes and dislikes and each was responsible for buying an imaginary present for another. The gifts were tapped out along the wall and each one was unique and personal, and sometimes funny.[49]

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[48] Ibid, 218-223.

[49] Coffee, *Beyond Survival*, 212.

For other special occasions, birthdays and anniversaries, the men would plan an imaginary party. Each prisoner had responsibility for planning a certain part of the party. One planned the entertainment, another the food, and another the location of the party. At the designated time all the men would be assembled with their wives or dates. Parties were held at the Palace in Monte Carlo and the Astrodome. Sometimes they traveled in limousines or on elephants and feasted on caviar and prime ribs. According to Coffee, "the basics were never neglected: barrels of hot fudge sundaes, plates stacked with hot fresh brownies, and cold milk right out of the cow."[50] The experiences were vivid and, colorful, and provided the men with an incredibly imaginative way to escape their daily life of prison cells and meager food rations.

Sometimes the men just had fun with one another, even playing somewhat elaborate practical jokes. When Coffee received a new roommate, Dave Rehmann, who also was from California, two men at the far end of the building inquired about growing citrus plants. Coffee and Rehmann had no knowledge about growing citrus plants, but that did not stop them from acting like they did. They spent their nights thinking up new lessons and advice that seemed reasonable. The next day they would pass along their great knowledge on the subject. At the end of the week they concluded with instructions to brand the stem of the plant with a branding iron and add ink to the water, as this would cause the fruit to grow pre-stamped. At this point all the men in the building who had been passing along the information knew Coffee and Rehmann had tricked them. As Coffee and Rehmann "nearly rolled on the floor laughing," the Vietnamese guard scolded

[50] Ibid., 152-153.

them because "American 'criminals' weren't supposed to be having fun."[51] This ruse was all in fun and at least it had helped them to endure another week.

Occasionally the men were able to focus on something positive in their desolate condition. When a baby bird fell from the rafter into a cell, two roommates immediately had a pet and something on which to focus their energy. When the men in the building heard about the bird, they began a contest to name it. They let their creativity flow and finally settled on Charlie, a name used to refer to the enemy. As the two roommates nurtured the tiny baby bird they sent out daily updates on how Charlie was progressing. When Charlie was old enough to begin flying, he had difficulty. The prisoners, mostly pilots, were quick to offer their advice on how to make Charlie more aerodynamic. Charlie was a source of great joy for the men of the building and his untimely death was a great loss.[52]

Fewer instances of collaboration or participation with the enemy can be found in the prison camps of Vietnam. But three cases created significant difficulties within the camps. Navy Commander Robert Schweitzer and Marine Lieutenant Colonel Edison Miller collaborated to produce a radio program other POWs labeled the "Bob and Ed Show."[53] Navy Commander Walter Eugene Wilber later joined Miller and Schweitzer. For their radio broadcasts the three prisoners were permitted to eat their meals outside

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[51] Ibid., 239.

[52] Ibid., 230-237.

[53] Rochester and Kiley, *Honor Bound*, 440.

their cells.[54] Other privileges included "leather shoes, better quality beds, individual razors, exclusive use of a flush toilet facility and virtually unlimited access and movement around the camp."[55] In the final months of captivity, Miller and Wilber continued to speak out against US involvement in Vietnam and refused to join the Fourth Allied POW Wing.[56]

Few other prisoners were singled out for release or special indoctrination but cases can be noted throughout the years. Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Jon Black was captured in October of 1968 and released in February of 1969. Black was not in contact with the main prison population and received special treatment during his months in captivity. When Black objected to early release and tried to obey the Code of Conduct his objections were ignored and he was returned.[57] Air Force Colonel William Beekman, who was captured in 1972 noted that prisoners captured in the last year of the war were isolated from the main population and subjected to invitations from Miller and Wilber. They promised freedom to move around and special food.[58]

Under the leadership of Colonel Flynn an Amnesty Policy was instituted which stated "Forgive and forget, live and let live."[59] In light of this new policy, Schweitzer abandoned Miller and Wilber and attempted to rejoin the larger prison population. The

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[54] Ibid., 511.

[55] Ibid., 569.

[56] Ibid., 553.

[57] Jon Black, Oral History.

[58] Beekman, Oral History.

[59] Howes, *Voices of the Vietnam POWs*, 198.

transition was difficult as many fellow prisoners would "never forgive him and would continue to associate him with Miller and Wilber."[60] The hatred for collaborators ran deep but did not result in physical violence while in the camp system.

Conclusion

Strong interpersonal relationships proved invaluable in the fight against communist indoctrination. In both Korea and Vietnam, the prisoners who fought the hardest against the their captors created a network of friends who provided support and encouragement. Those who participated with their captors were isolated in each situation as much as possible either by the prison officials or by the prison population.

In Korean prison camps, the communist indoctrinators were very effective in identifying the men who would cooperate and inform on other prisoners. The constant fear of informers led to few close relationships. Within the small groups of trust that formed, men found encouragement in their resistance efforts. Plans were made for escapes and disruptions, and these provided the men with hope and the feeling that they were working towards the future and their ultimate release. By planning to purchase a car when they returned to the states they were visualizing their future outside of the prison and were creating a reason to survive.

Vietnam prisoners abiding by the guidelines of the Code of Conduct did not suffer from fear of infiltration by informers. In accordance with Articles III and IV, prisoners were resolved to "accept neither parole nor special favors from the enemy" and to "give

[60] Rochester and Kiley, *Honor Bound*, 440.

no information or take part in any action which might be harmful to my comrades."[61] With few exceptions the Vietnam prisoners held tightly to these statements and were able to guard against the manipulation experienced by the prisoners of the North Koreans.

The few prisoners in North Vietnam who chose to collaborate where isolated from the main prison population and provided special conditions. Even with that fear eliminated the Vietnam prisoners faced uniquely harsh conditions not found in the Korean camps. Relationships faced difficult challenges through the realities of isolation and the regulation against communicating in any form.

Korean War prisoners were not overly restricted in their movements or communication. While the freedom of their circumstances might have led to escape attempts or mass organization of the prison population, this was not the reality. Korean War prisoners made very little use of the freedoms they were given. Officers rarely attempted to overcome the barriers restricting their interactions with the enlisted men and few non-commissioned officers tried to establish military order in enlisted areas. Instead of forming a military style organization and functioning as a military organization, Korean Resisters formed small groups with specific purposes.

It is not surprising to find that Resisters developed the closest personal relationships. Resisters faced the most adversity and endured the harshest conditions. Under trying circumstances Korean War POWs turned toward fellow Resisters for support and encouragement. The Resister community most closely resembled the

[61] *Code of the U.S. Fighting Force*, 4-14.

Vietnam experience and yet still did not reach the level of devotion, camaraderie and support found among the Vietnam POWs.

Rather than the deep personal connections that Vietnam POWs experienced, the Korean War prisoners exhibited a shallow, surface connection. By organizing Crazy Week prisoners interacted in a comical, physical way. Resistance to Participators centered on physical violence rather than building ideological and philosophical arguments against communism.

Vietnam POWs, in contrast, lacked physical, visual, and even oral contact. Vietnam prisoners communicated primarily through the tap code and occasionally through verbal conversations. They combated indoctrination through encouragement and thoughtful discussions passed through cell walls. Living for long periods in isolation, prisoners had to overcome great obstacles to communicate with one another. Vietnam POWs bypassed small talk and went immediately to important issues worthy of the risk they were taking to communicate.

Participators, those collaborating with their communist captors, garnered very strong feelings from the rest of the prison population. In both experiences these groups were designated outcasts and looked down upon by those resisting or working to remain true to the Code of Conduct. The freedom of movement found in Korean camps enabled Resisters to have personal contact with Participators and attempt to change their behavior through violence. Vietnam POWs did not have the same level of access to those working with the communists and there was very little that could be done to influence them.

One common factor in the development of close relationships was harsh circumstances. Korean Resisters and Vietnam POWs were forced to lean on one another for support because they desperately needed encouragement and companionship to survive the difficult time as prisoners. The more difficult the situation, the stronger the bond. Overcoming adversity and challenges to these relationships increased their value and importance.

CHAPTER V

THE CHAIN OF COMMAND AND THE ABILITY TO RESIST

> "If I become a prisoner of war I will keep faith with my fellow prisoners. I will give no information or take part in any action, which might be harmful to my comrades. If I am senior, I will take command. If not I will obey the lawful orders of those appointed over me and will back them up in every way."
>
> Article Four, Military
> Code of Conduct, 1955[1]

In 1955, President Dwight D. Eisenhower approved the newly drafted Military Code of Conduct. This Code was developed as a direct result of the behavior of American POWs in Korea.[2] A major provision in the Code required servicemen to develop a chain of command. Senior officers were obligated to take responsibility; junior officers were obligated to follow orders. Although the vast majority of Korean War prisoners lived lives devoid of any military order, there were instances of officers who attempted to establish order with some degree of success. In contrast, the chain of command was an invaluable part of the Vietnam experience. The chain of command was an important part of the daily life of American POWs in Vietnam and aided their survival.

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[1] *Code of the U.S. Fighting Force*, 4-14.

[2] Howes, *Voices of the Vietnam POWs*, 17.

The Korean Experience

The composition of the prison population was an important factor in establishing a chain of command. In Korean prison camps, fifty-seven percent of the prisoners were "enlisted men below the rank of sergeant." Thirty-eight percent were noncommissioned officers and only five percent were officers.[3] These numbers provide significant insight into the POWs reaction upon encountering the prison environment: the vast majority of prisoners reacted favorably to the communist rule that prisoners were all equal in rank.

Chaos reigned in the open living arrangement of Korean prison camps. Men who had "been reduced to the level of animals," lived with little regard for discipline.[4] As American POWs entered Korean prison camps they were usually divided into groups according to rank and race. Although the groups were separated, there is evidence that "no attempt was made to completely isolate officers from enlisted men."[5] It was against camp rules for officers to give orders to enlisted men and officers were ordered to remove any evidence of rank from their uniform.[6] Many low ranking enlisted men were quick to accept to idea of a rankless society, and "there was nothing to keep him, a private, from confronting a colonel if he imagined the colonel to be doing something wrong."[7] As

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[3] *Factors Related to the Collaboration and Resistance*, 39.

[4] Lech, *Broken Soldiers*, 43.

[5] Polk, *Korean War*, 29.

[6] "Accounts of POWs During The Korean War," The Papers of General Mark Clark, Box 52. The Citadel, Charleston, S.C., 15.

[7] Lech, *Broken Soldiers*, 55.

army psychiatrist Major William E. Mayer stated, when men became prisoners in Korea "they somehow ceased to be soldiers."[8]

According to a new 2nd Lieutenant, Ed Daily, "I had lost control of my platoon as the enemy soldiers were closing in." Chaos began on the battlefield and continued in the camps.[9] At Bean Camp "officers and NCOs completely lost control, and the soldiers became a mob." In an effort to undermine the authority of officers and senior NCOs, the camp administrators appointed a young corporal to act as company commander of the officers.[10] During a march, while officers were permitted to mix with enlisted men, an officer ordered an enlisted man to assist another. The enlisted man responded by saying, "You are just a POW – you go to hell; you are just like the rest of us." Korean guards found great satisfaction in the breakdown of the military structure.[11]

Segregating the prisoners according rank also was helpful for indoctrination. Major William E. Mayer reported the communists recognized that those prisoners with more education and those with extensive military service would be more resistant to indoctrination. The communists estimated that for some prisoners indoctrination might take up to five years. "And they apparently did not concentrate their brain washing on officers as much as on enlisted men."[12] Prior to arriving in Korea American servicemen

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[8] "Why Did Many GI Captives Cave In?" *U.S. News and World Report* (Feb. 24, 1956).

[9] Polk, *The Korean War*, 20.

[10] Lech, *Broken Soldiers*, 50-51.

[11] Lech, *Broken Soldiers*, 44.

[12] "Why Did Many GI Captives Cave In?" 64.

had been provided limited instructions on how to behave as a POW. Most had been instructed to only provide name, rank and serial number.[13]

To further disrupt any efforts to organize under an American military structure, the camp officials instituted their own tightly controlled prison organization. Prisons contained between three and seven companies, each of varying size but averaging about 200 men. The company was further divided into platoons and then squads.[14] POWs held positions as platoon and squad leaders, sometimes elected and sometimes appointed by the Chinese and North Koreans.[15] Platoon and squad leaders were placed in charge of certain aspects of indoctrination. During some sessions, probably depending on the loyalty of the POW leaders, senior officers and NCOs were able to pass along policies. One policy required prisoners to respond to questions with "no comment."[16]

One former prisoner, Army medical doctor Major Clarence L. Anderson, described the ideal prison camp organization:

> If things had been done right, the men in a squad or a platoon would have gotten up at a specified time in the morning at an order from their senior member, washed and lined up for chow....Each man would have seen to keeping his body and his clothing free of lice...men would have been detailed to look after the sick...the leader of a well-run outfit would have organized calisthenics and games, and got the men to make chess and checker sets. The nightmare of guilt that still haunts so many of those who returned would have been avoided, and, most important, more of us would have returned.[17]

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[13] Lech, *Broken Soldiers,* 3.

[14] Eugene Kinkade, *Why They Collaborated* (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd., 1959), 102.

[15] Lech, *Broken Soldiers,* 66.

[16] "Account of a POW During the Korean War, Air Force Master Sergeant Robert Wilkins," The Papers of General Mark Clark, The Citadel, Charleston S.C., 145.

[17] Kinkead, *Why They Collaborated,* 156-157.

In a prison camp with a strong sense of unity this imaginary situation could have been reality.

Despite the efforts of the camp administrators, some prisoners did hold tightly to their identity as American servicemen. In one instance two officers of equal rank compared the dates of their rank to determine who had received their promotion first.[18] In Valley Camp the officers found a way to have the senior officer placed in charge with the permission of camp officials. Camp officials designed the camp to be run by a few select prisoners elected by the general population. The officer group chose to elect their senior officer. The elected officer, Colonel Harry Fleming, gained access to the enlisted men's area and issued tough policies to discourage self-pity.[19]

Colonel Fleming organized the officer compound based on military structure. Under his leadership the officers developed "an executive council of officers, including a mess officer, detail officer, and medical and religious advisors."[20] Captain George Deakin noted that, "we needed a firm guiding hand as well as a representative."[21] While some appreciated the Colonel's efforts, many came to resent his insistence of strict military discipline. Captain Clifford Allen stated "I have nothing but sympathy for the man who finds himself in the position of leader when he is a captive among

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[18] Lech, Broken Soldiers, 43.

[19] Ibid., 45.

[20] Ibid., 46-47.

[21] Ibid., 47.

captives....He comes in for criticism from his own people, and interrogation and pressure from the enemy."[22]

In Company 1, a part of Camp 2, Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel W. G. Thrash issued orders to those under his command. "His orders included the following:

1. There will be no fraternizing with the Chinese or competing in athletic events with them.

2. Study of communist propaganda will not be countenanced. (If study is forced on them, POW's were to offer passive resistance and no arguments.)

3. If POWs were taken from camp and offered alcoholic beverages, they were not to drink with their captors under any circumstances.

4. POWs would not perform labor for the communists unless that labor benefited the prisoners.

5. If prisoners were subjected to trial or punishment, they were to involve none but themselves.

6. There would be no letters written using any titles or return addresses which might prove beneficial to the communists for propaganda use."[23]

Issuing orders went against the rules of the camp administration and Lt. Col. Thrash was accused of having committed "Criminal Acts and Hostile Attitudes against the Chinese Peoples's Volunteers." Thrash suffered many months of solitary confinement for the leadership role he chose to take.[24]

Many problems in the camp could have been alleviated by military organization. Many who have studied the American POW experience in Korea compare the

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[22] Ibid., 47-48.

[23] Polk, *The Korean War*, 44.

[24] Ibid., 44.

performance of American servicemen to the Turkish POWs. While the mortality rate of American soldiers was extremely high, the Turkish soldiers returned home with almost no losses. The success of these soldiers is largely attributed to their maintenance of strict discipline and military order. With this discipline and order came a strong sense of unity. "Thus, when a man became ill, a detail of soldiers was assigned to care for that man and ensure his recovery by any means possible. They often bathed, spoon-fed and cared for their sick and wounded with a tremendous degree of devotion."[25]

In contrast to the Turkish example, the American servicemen taken captive suffered a high mortality rate. The high death rate was one result of lax discipline among the U.S. ranks. According to Major Clarence L. Anderson, "It is a sad fact, but it is a fact, that the men who were captured in large groups early in the war too often became unmanageable. They refused to obey orders, and they cursed and sometimes struck officers trying to enforce orders.... At first, the badly wounded suffered most.... The able-bodied refused to carry them even when their officers commanded them to do so."[26] As Dr. Anderson made his rounds in the prison camp he gave up encouraging the men to act like soldiers and simply encouraged them to act like humans.[27]

The example of senior officers had a profound effect on junior officers and enlisted men. First Lieutenant William H. Funchess wrote, "I became so sick I couldn't eat. My company commander, Capt. Louis Rockwert, would lay my head in his lap and

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[25] "Why Did Many GI Captives Cave In?" 58.

[26] Kinkead, *Why They Collaborated,* 154.

[27] Ibid., 155.

feed me like a baby. He did so for several days. Then I began to have hunger pains."[28] The strength that senior officers found to help those around them inspired some POWs to do the same. Funchess also recalled the circumstances leading to the death of a Major Hume. Major Hume was asked to comment on a communist reading and responded with "It's not worth the paper it is written on and the paper is not worth a damn." Major Hume then became one of the few casualties resulting from harsh treatment by the captors. Lt. Funchess wrote that it had a "sobering effect" on him and convinced him that the "communists, indeed, were most serious in the conduct of their indoctrination."[29]

Major Mayer, an army psychiatrist, examining POWs after the war, attributed the behavior of prisoners in Korean prison camps to poor training. He noted an attitude instilled in the men that "man himself is something of a machine; that motivation and will to fight and to defend our country, that leadership and a sense of identification with other men in the military unit are no longer important."[30] Prisoners in Korea received significantly less training than Vietnam POWs and did not have the guidelines provided by the Code of Conduct.

The Vietnam Experience

The American POW experience in Vietnam was defined by determination, strict military order and camaraderie. Like the Turkish prisoners in the Korean War, Vietnam

[28] Spiller, *American POWs in Korea*, 51.

[29] Ibid., 54.

[30] "Why Did Many GI Captives Cave In?" 64.

prisoners found that identifying with their fellow prisoners as military men increased their effectiveness in standing up to communist indoctrination. Senior officers in the chain of command were able to issue orders, create unilateral camp policies, and determine actions to be taken in daily routines.

Once the servicemen were able to communicate with each other they were able to form a chain of command. Article IV of the Military Code of Conduct, initially viewed as a legal document by the early prisoners, required the establishment of a chain of command for prisoners of war. The chain of command allowed leaders to establish rules and regulations consistent with the Code of Conduct.[31] The prisoners were American servicemen trained to give and follow orders, and the chain of command was a basic necessity for maintaining the military structure of their community. Most of the prisoners were highly educated Navy and Air Force officers who had voluntarily joined the military for long-term careers. Their sense of patriotism and pride in their military backgrounds created unmatched respect for military institutions.

Establishing the chain of command occasionally created heated discussions. The senior officers of the camp, namely James Stockdale, Robinson Risner and Jeremiah Denton, were undisputed. When one was taken out of the communication system for torture or isolation, the next in command would step in and carry out the policies of his predecessor or send out new orders. Problems arose in the absence of a clear Senior Officer (SRO). Denton, to prevent this problem occurring in his absence, established the ranking order of the men in his command, sometimes passing higher-ranking officers in

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[31] Howes, *Voices of the Vietnam POWs*, 30.

favor of those who had taken leadership roles.[32] Once established, the chain of command became an invaluable part of maintaining morale and enforcing order.

It took strong and courageous leaders to unite the prisoners under these adverse conditions. The senior ranking officers were a necessary link in the support system for their fellow inmates. Each camp and each building had a SRO, and prisoners passed along messages from the senior officer over all the camps as the Vietnamese randomly transferred and shuffled them.

Denton, Risner, Stockdale and many other senior officers spent much of their time isolated at Camp Alcatraz, where the Vietnamese attempted to separate the top officers believed to have encouraged insubordination through their communication network and their examples of resistance.[33] Despite much time in isolation Stockdale was able to implement two policies that traveled throughout most of the camp facilities. In 1965 he issued the "bounce back" order. This policy stated that prisoners should endure torture to the best of their ability, recover, and make the Vietnamese continue to torture them for more information.[34] In 1967 he issued the BACK US policy which stressed "unity over self" and also spelled out orders against bowing in public, making broadcasts, admitting to war crimes and showing appreciation to the Vietnamese.[35] The third group of policies, the Plums were issued by the new SRO Colonel Flynn, in response to the new communal

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[32] Howes, *Voices of the Vietnam POWs*, 26.

[33] Biank, "Ex-POW Denton."

[34] Howes, *Voices of the Vietnam POWs*, 30.

[35] Rochester and Kiley, *Honor Bound*, 298.

living situation.[36] The Plums reiterated many of Stockdale's previous policies but also encouraged prisoners to work with the Vietnamese to improve conditions and forgive those POWs who had made mistakes in the past.

The first job of a senior officer was to determine his interpretation of the Code of Conduct. The men were instructed to do their very best to follow the Code of Conduct and especially Articles III and V, which directly addressed many of the prisoners' concerns. Article III stated that American military men will, "resist the enemy," "make every effort to escape," and "neither accept parole nor special favors from the enemy."[37] Article V instructs POWs to "evade" answering questions and forbids making oral or written statements against the United States.[38] Although there were many plans and dreams, escapes were rare. They were not encouraged by senior officers because of the extreme risk to both the escapee and those prisoners left behind and the unlikelihood of success. The men found small ways to resist on a daily basis as well as during interrogations and torture. Resistance and evading questions during interrogations became the most controversial elements of the Code of Conduct.

Servicemen initially fell into two categories, "tough guys" or "softies." "Tough guys" believed in a strict interpretation of the Code while "softies" took a more loose

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[36] Howes, *Voices of the Vietnam POWs*, 31.

[37] Ibid., 22

[38] Ibid., 26.

interpretation. Most servicemen were a combination of both and even Stockdale acknowledged over time that Article V is "just a piece of good advice."[39] Interpretations changed as leaders experienced the harsh torture and the guilt of failing to follow the Code of Conduct. More lenient views stressed holding out as long as possible but allowed men to survive without breaking the law and betraying their country.

William Breckner noted differences between the Air Force and the Navy. Breckner had trained at both the Air Force and Navy survival schools and while the Navy taught strict interpretations of the Code, the Air Force provided a "second line of defense" if subjected to life threatening beatings.[40] Regardless of different interpretations, the Code of Conduct remained the basic guideline despite different interpretations of standards and senior officers were instrumental in setting policies.

Commands were always changing as SROs were transferred from one camp to another and although the basic message remained the same, the different approaches to leadership and the unique situation presented many challenges. John Fer, in his report titled "Leadership and Followership in a Prisoner of War Environment," proposes that the lack of continuity from one SRO to the next caused problems in the command structure. Fer remembered one instance in which a junior officer refused to sign a statement to receive a package. A "wimpy" senior officer was taken out next and returned with the package. This example angered many of the men and hurt the credibility of the senior

[39] Ibid., 26-30.

[40] Breckner, Oral History, 28.

officer.[41] While many prisoners would agree that the transfer of leadership was not smooth, it can be explained by the unique situation. Communication was always difficult, if not impossible, and often an SRO was introduced into a camp without any understanding of the current situation in the camp.[42]

Colonel Ted Guy spent almost four years in solitary confinement only to have the Vietnamese return him to a camp with 100 men, where he immediately became the senior officer.[43] Guy's command of the "Plantation" camp proved to be a challenge. The "Plantation" was the showpiece for visiting foreign dignitaries and the home of the "Peace Committee" of prisoners collaborating with the Vietnamese. Members of the Peace Committee received special privileges including better food, freedom to move around the camp and occasional trips into Hanoi.[44] Prisoners who chose to adhere to the Code of Conduct and reject special privileges faced the demoralizing actions of their fellow Americans each day.

Maintaining morale in the face of such actions was especially difficult. Guy chose to reinforce belief in the Code. He tapped out seven regulations he felt the men under his command should follow. The men were to support United States policies, resist to the best of their ability, accept no special treatment, and be proud of their American heritage. They were instructed not to write or tape messages, or accept early release from their

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[41] Fer, Oral History, 45-46.

[42] Breckner, Oral History, 35-36.

[43] Grant, *Survivors*, 258-260.

[44] Frank Anton and Tommy Denton, *Why Didn't You Get Me Out: Betrayal in the Viet Cong Death Camps and The Truth about Heroes, Traitors and Those Left Behind* (Arlington, VA: The Summit Publishing Group, 1997), 126-136.

captors. Guy's primary goal was to boost morale, and to do this he wanted "to get everybody thinking about resisting as much as they could. Many prisoners were beaten once and thereafter routinely began to comply with the NVA. Once was not enough." As these regulations traveled through the camp by the tap system they served to reinforce the community's pride and deeply held American patriotic beliefs; however, it took three months before the entire camp became aware of the policy.[45]

Relatively small decisions regarding daily comportment became very important in reassuring the men when they questioned how far they should go to resist the Vietnamese in their daily activities. Individual senior officers formed policies as daily situations arose and required their intervention. Usually disagreements between SROs and junior officers arose because junior officers wanted to take a harder line against the Vietnamese. Timothy Ayers recalled junior officers making statements such as, "Lets go on a hunger strike if we can't do this." But Ayers noted that the senior officers had to "weigh the good of the group."[46] One serviceman held at a camp called the Pig Sty refused to bow to Vietnamese prison authorities as the rules stated. As many others began to follow his lead the Vietnamese withheld their meager food allowances. Bill France, the SRO of the Pig Sty, observed this action and the severe repercussions and ordered his men to concede to the bowing regulation, as a simple matter of survival. France believed it was more important to concede to the small rules rather than suffer the consequences.[47]

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[45] Grant, *Survivor*, 260-261.

[46] Ayers, Oral History, 48-49.

[47] Coffee, *Beyond Survival*, 248.

Messages from senior officers often encouraged and instructed the men under their command. During the spring of 1966, Lieutenant Alvarez and other prisoners at the Zoo received both a message of encouragement and a reminder of a regulation from Risner, the SRO over all the camps, while he was being held at the Hanoi Hilton. The message reminded the men to continue resisting and following the Code of Conduct. The encouraging part of the message came in learning that Risner sent out the statement while personally enduring severe torture. For the men at the Zoo, this word of encouragement from a man they respected and admired was an incredible morale booster.[48]

Leadership, routines and rules became even more important as the POW community changed and a large group of men began living together. Following the Son Tay raid in November 1970, when the United States raided a POW camp that, unfortunately, had recently been abandoned, the Vietnamese, concerned about security against similar raids in the future, concentrated POWs who had been in outlying camps at a facility the POWs called Camp Unity. In Camp Unity, the prisoners were kept in rooms with thirty or forty other men. This communal living often created tensions that had not existed in solitary or two man cells. Men had become accustomed to continuously challenging and threatening situations and limited contact with other Americans. The relatively easier life of Camp Unity and the large groups of men meant that behaviors, routines and expectations had to be altered. The time of transition into this larger community was one of difficult adjustments.

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[48] Alvarez and Pitch, *Chained Eagle*, 139.

Senior officers encouraged mental stimulation and the prisoners became very creative. Article 38 of the Geneva Convention requires captors to encourage mental stimulation; however, the Vietnamese refused to follow the Geneva Convention, since the United States had never officially declared war.[49] Prisoners often created new games or adapted old ones, in an effort to remain active. Some men created architectural house plans while others worked complicated mathematical problems in their head. Colonel Ted Guy believed mental activity was crucial to survival, as boredom and inactivity during years of solitary would surely take their toll on many of the men.[50] Myron McDonald was able to combat the boredom of solitary by designing cars, airplanes and even a car seat with holes to let air cool the driver's back.[51]

Prisoners learned to entertain themselves despite limited resources. While Alvarez was spending time in solitary confinement, he and his neighbor devised a way to challenge each other through chess. The floors in their cell were checkered tiles, which the men used for the board. They took advantage of bits and pieces of collected scraps of broken glass and rocks and used them for the pieces. They tapped out the row and c olumn numbers of their moves and they were able to play very effectively. Coffee and a roommate played basketball with paper wads and cups. Others devised similar ways to adapt their favorite games.[52]

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[49] The Geneva Convention. n.d., http://www.aiipowmia.com/legis/geneva1950html

[50] Grant. *Survivor,* 253-255.

[51] Donald. Oral History. 38.

[52] Alvarez and Pitch. *Chained Eagle,* 130.

Conclusions

The chain of command was an essential element of the Vietnam POW experience. An effective chain of command took the pressure from individuals and allowed them to place their trust in senior officers. Senior officers had difficult jobs and in Vietnam prison camps proved to be exceptional leaders. Junior officers depended heavily on orders involving interpretations of the code of conduct. Even orders such as Admiral Stockdale's order to resist, recover and resist again were followed by the men under his command. This order meant torture for many prisoners as they resisted indoctrination and interrogation to the best of their ability, but pride in their military service and respect for the chain of command led few to question orders.

Like many SROs in Vietnam, Korean War officer POWs faced difficult opposition to communication with enlisted POWs. There is no evidence of any officer taking extreme measures to contact men in other camp areas. In areas designated for officers, reports were made of officers taking command and yet many problems still remained unaddressed, leading to numerous hardships easily correctable by initiating military discipline and order. Even among enlisted men a hierarchy of rank existed and yet most senior non-commissioned officers also failed to take leadership roles. Although several instances of officers or senior NCOs taking command have been noted in this paper this actually was rare. Chaos dominated the typical American POW experience in Korea.

In enlisted areas, it is less surprising to find a severe lack of discipline and mass chaos. Enlisted men were, on average, young men in their late teens and early twenties.

For many of the men their military careers were the result of the draft or desperation. Most had no real dedication to military service or plans to make the military their career. Enlisted men also suffered the most intense indoctrination efforts. Believing that the younger, less educated men would be more susceptible to communist indoctrination and Pavlovian techniques the communists spent a great deal of effort on capturing the minds of this group.

Major Anderson outlined several actions that could have been taken by senior officers and NCOs in Korean camps to improve the lives of the men. In Vietnam, these actions were taken. Men shared a routine, took care of their bodies, often cared for sick or injured cellmates, and created makeshift board games that could even be played through cell walls. While POWs in Korea found ways to spend their time, senior officers did not organize or create mandatory programs.

In the past thirty years, the word "honor" has been closely associated with Vietnam POWs, drawing a sharp distinction between the experiences of Vietnam and Korea. The chain of command was central to the maintenance of honor in the prison camps. The vast majority of POWs stayed within the boundaries of honor as defined by their superior officers. Wise leaders understood the value of flexible boundaries. Senior officers changed their orders as circumstances developed and the POWs did their best to stay within the boundaries.

Senior officers in Vietnam overcame extreme obstacles to remain in communication with their fellow prisoners. The Vietnam prisoners were officers, highly educated and usually older than the average Korean War prisoner. Despite the men's

inability to meet one another face to face, they implicitly trusted each other and learned to depend on men they looked up to. Korean War prisoners lacked strong leaders and disciplined men willing to follow. This equation was balanced in Vietnam to create a helpful structure for survival.

The prisoners of the Vietnam War had the added benefit of a Code of Conduct, created as a result of the Korean War that specifically identified the goals and objectives of a POW. Navy and Air Force officers had received training pertaining to the proper conduct of a prisoner of war and a prominent facet of this training had been the development of a chain of command. Although interpretations of the Code of Conduct changed during the years of the Vietnam War the prisoners worked hard to follow the Code to the best of their ability. Obeying the orders of senior officers often required prisoners to put their lives in danger, but the servicemen were willing to follow orders to obey the Code of Conduct.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION: WHAT MADE THE DIFFERENCE?

In 1953, prisoners of war returned home from Korea to questions about their loyalty and communist brainwashing. Facing difficult questions and suspicion, prisoners were willing to tell of their experience and implicate fellow prisoners in collaboration. Twenty years later prisoners of war from Vietnam faced a very different homecoming. In 1973 all but a few Vietnam POWs returned with their honor intact to receive the welcome of grateful Americans. Prisoner behavior in these two conflicts could not have been more different.

What factors contributed to the different outcome? This study has outlined significant differences as well as interesting similarities in four areas of the POW experience. The two groups of prisoners faced captors who adopted different strategies for indoctrination and interrogation. In both instances, prisoners faced a multitude of illnesses and physical difficulties, often for different reasons. There were sharp contrasts in prisoner relationships that had a great impact on the outcome of the POW experience. Finally, the chain of command, essentially lacking in the Korean camps, proved invaluable in Vietnam.

While the Koreans focused on education of their prisoners, the Vietnamese focused on tangible products. Most of the young, less educated prisoners of the Korean

War found it difficult to fight the ideological battle for their minds.[1] Sitting in a classroom, reading a book or talking to a friendly guard seemed harmless. They were unable to comprehend the subtle pavlovian principals designed to increase their intake of communism. Unaware of the seriousness of the communist plan, most of the American prisoners in Korea cooperated or showed minimal resistance to the indoctrination system.

As Sam Johnson, a Vietnam POW, stated, "…because of differences in educational background, the kids over there were 17-21 year-olds versus most of us who were 25-plus, and most college graduates, they're dealing with a different type of mentality, and it was harder for them to make us believe something although they tried on occasion."[2] Obtaining tangible products, rather than the development of true communist comrades, was the goal of the North Vietnamese. The North Vietnamese realized that true converts would be difficult to achieve so they focused on forced written statements or radio broadcasts that, whether true or not, could be used for propaganda purposes.

One major difference in these two experiences is the absence or presence of coercion. When prisoners were made to feel as if they wanted to cooperate, as if they were making decisions of their own free will, there was very little resistance. Why would a person resist something they chose to do? When prisoners faced forcible action by their captors their resistance was stronger.

Prisoners faced a myriad of illnesses and physical difficulties. As Korean War veteran and Vietnam POW Sam Johnson noted, both groups of prisoners were treated

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[1] Sam Johnson, Interview by Steve Maxner, 2001, Transcribed Tape Recording, 5. The Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, Lubbock.

[2] Ibid., 6.

badly. In both wartime experiences, prisoners suffered from malnutrition, poor hygiene and sanitation, exposure and lack of, or inadequate, medical care. In addition to illnesses, Vietnam prisoners had to deal with the added complication of injuries resulting from their capture or resulting from subsequent torture. While the Vietnam prisoners fought and worked together through dangerous conditions to survive, many of the Korean War prisoners surrendered to hopelessness and the psychological games of their captors.

Why did the groups react so differently? Hopelessness resulted from the Korean experience largely because the illnesses and difficulties the prisoners faced were viewed as out of the control of their captors. Private First Class Donald M. Elliott noted that Korean guards suffered from night blindness due to a lack of vegetables and one day he observed a "blind Korean woman trying to find food for herself and a naked baby.... She was sitting in the garbage pile sifting though the garbage with her hands."[3] Illness, poor nutrition and weather conditions were hardships dealt with by prisoners and captors alike. This provided a commonality for the prisoners and the captors rather than inspiring resistance.

In the prison camps of North Vietnam, prisoners were given no help for common ailments such as worms and parasites. These were common to the Vietnamese people and not something for which they normally provided medical treatment. The use of physical torture in Vietnam gave the men something to resist. Fighting against torture and fighting to recover from injuries inflicted by their captors united the men. Torture created anger and determination to resist Vietnamese demands, to the best of their ability.

[3] Spiller, *American POW's in Korea*, 9.

They were forced to lift one another up through encouragement and empathy. While it is likely that Vietnam prisoners would have resisted under less trying circumstances, in the actual experience the men formed an incredibly strong bond as they shared the torture experience.

Relationships with other prisoners proved essential to effective resistance. Resisters faced the harshest treatment from their captors and few could survive the added difficulties without contact from supportive friends or the knowledge that their support structure existed and was doing all it could to help. Close relationships could sometimes be found among Resisters in the Korean camps, but in an environment where mistrust was encouraged and carefully cultivated few men felt free to trust a fellow prisoner. Resisters needed a support group to provide encouragement and strength. In contrast, those Korean prisoners who chose to participate with their captors did not face additional hardships and thus had less need for friends and confidants.

The Vietnam situation, because of the difficult shared circumstances, created uniquely strong bonds. Vietnam POWs had to overcome obstacles to communicating but did not face the fear of infiltration by informers. Again, the extra difficulties led to bonds of friendship that extended well beyond the surface. Vietnam POWs came to know each other as well as they knew themselves. They understood the hopes and dreams of men who would remain faceless until the last year of the war. The respect and care these men had for one another was evident in their united stand against their captors.

The importance of maintaining the chain of command while in captivity became evident following the Korean experience. Again, the subtle manipulations of the

communist captors encouraged a rankless society, while actually choosing to place low ranking, inexperienced servicemen in command. The idea of a rankless society was appealing to young servicemen, many of whom had been in the army less than a year. With this rankless society the communists were able to mold the prisoners into their own structure with their own chain of command. The effect was chaos in the eyes of Americans and perfection in the eyes of the captors. Orders about conduct and resistance had no basis in authority and, when occasionally issued, were summarily rejected by the majority of prisoners.

To avoid a repetition of the insubordinate actions found in Korea, the Department of Defense established the Code of Conduct in 1955, requiring the establishment of a military chain of command in any future POW situation. Vietnam was the first test of this requirement and the results were impressive. Senior officers in Vietnam POW camps assumed leadership roles and performed admirably as leaders of men. Speaking about senior officer James Stockdale, Sam Johnson stated, "...he took the bull by the horns as the ranking member at the time and structured our living environment in a posture that kept us fighting the Vietnamese the whole time we were there, and that's part of the fighting man's creed."[4] Senior officers in Vietnam earned the respect of fellow prisoners and inspired the men to resist by example.

What made the difference? First, when conditions were the worst men felt the need to unite and had a definite and determined focus for their resistance. When conditions seemed beyond the control of the captors, despair set in and resistance was

[4] Johnson, Oral History, 29.

minimal. Second, different groups of men proved to have different levels of susceptibility. The young and less well-educated prisoners of Korea encountered a new phenomenon in communist "brainwashing" and proved less able to recognize the tactics of manipulation used by their captors. The college educated, career officers of Vietnam were prepared for an ideological battle but instead faced a difficult physical battle.

Through similarities and differences it is evident that the prisoners of war in Korea and Vietnam survived daunting trials. Facing America's first battle for the minds of prisoners, Korean War POWs found themselves in an unprecedented situation for which their military training had not prepared them. Although the Vietnam experience proved unique, based on the Korean War experience, additional training and the expectation that the enemy might not abide by the rules of the Geneva Convention, aided prisoners.

Prisoners in the Korean War received very little training on the expected behavior of prisoners of war. With limited guidelines to follow, the prisoners failed to unite as a cohesive unit and thus found it more difficult to retain their identity as American servicemen. Learning from the Korean experience, the military began to institute survival, evasion and POW training. Attending these military schools helped prepare the servicemen for possible contingencies. The Vietnam experience did not follow the mold of Korea, but the training and the guidelines provided by the Code of Conduct proved invaluable in creating a supportive and survival oriented POW environment.

Years after the Korean prisoners returned home to suspicion of communist collaboration, few former prisoners from that war had created widely respected names for

themselves. They returned home and worked to lead ordinary lives, putting their experience behind them. Most Vietnam POWs, in contrast, returned home with their heads held high and their honor intact. Vietnam prisoners became successful inspirational speakers, congressmen, senators, ambassadors and even vice-presidential candidates. The different reactions when faced with a return to American society are directly related to their prison experiences. Those who took pride in their conduct as prisoners found the courage to build from it rather than push it aside. As Gerald Coffee, a former Vietnam POW wrote, " We enjoy the unique freedom to strive, to risk, to succeed and to sometimes fail, but always bounce back and succeed again as many times as we choose. We preserve that freedom by being well informed, by learning from history, by linking cause and effect, and by separating the wheat from the chaff."[5]

[5] Coffee, *Beyond Survival,* 238.

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