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Films, letters provide new evidence

Editor's note: This is the second in a series of five articles on the other side of the POW issue, specially commissioned by the editors.

In the first column in this series we saw that evidence gathered from (1) the Pentagon, (2) the White House, (3) private groups and individuals and, most importantly, (4) from former American POWs themselves, does not in any way indicate mistreatment of any sort by the North Vietnamese.

Now let us pursue this subject a little further, examine information about treatment and alleged "mistreatment" supplied by three additional sources, and from this draw a general conclusion about treatment of American POWs in North Vietnam.

• (5) Information from the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam—As early as July 25, 1969, and on many subsequent occasions, the North Vietnamese, in response to American statements and inquiries, have given wide but explicit assurances of the good treatment of POWs. On that date, the late North Vietnamese President Ho Chi Minh wrote:

"Although the captured American military men had perpetrated monstrous crimes such as the use of the B-52s, napalm bombs and toxic chemicals, etc., to burn and destroy villages and cities, and to massacre honest civilians, they have enjoyed a lenient and humane treatment from the Vietnamese people. In contrast, the Vietnamese army men and civilians captured by U.S. troops and the Saigon puppet administration have been tortured and massacred most savagely."

Won't condemn

One might say that the North Vietnamese cannot be expected to condemn themselves through their own statements. But nonetheless the fact stands that they have never lied to us before on any matter, and we can only assume that their honesty in the face of our lies and deceptions about our intentions in Vietnam has not waned. Particularly in an area such as this, where it is to their obvious advantage to be telling the truth.

• (6) Letters and other communications to the U.S. from the POWs—POW campaigners like to say that the prisoners are rarely or never allowed to communicate with or receive correspondence from the outside world. This simply is not true. Hundreds of letters and cards flow in both directions, and recent reports indicate the POWs are allowed to record messages to relatives at birthday times and on other occasions.

Though nothing in these communications has been shown to be especially critical of the North Vietnamese, and much is in fact complimentary, this is again scoffed at by a good many people because of what is at least the potential ability of the North Vietnamese to censor or restrict information leaving their country.

Film interview

One communication from POWs in the North cannot be eliminated for this reason, however. This is the Christmas Day interview with two American pilots filmed by Michael MacLear, a newsman for the Canadian Broadcasting Corp.

The two pilots who were interviewed, plus others whose activities at a POW camp were filmed by the CBC crew, all appeared in good health and were playing volleyball during much of the filming.

The two who were interviewed, Walter Wilbur and Robert Schweitzer, both said that they were well-treated, both called for an end to the war in Vietnam, by means of an immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops, and both discussed their daily routines at the camp, routines which included meals, sports, mail privileges, visits to museums

and other sites, books, exercises and "music programs and the like."

Both said they had discussed the war with fellow POWs during their detention. They also said they received letters about once a month and packages about every two months.

MacLear also interviewed DRV Premier Pham Van Dong, who told him: "I swear to you these men are well-treated."

Because this film, and other interviews and information like it, was so revealing of the lack of truth behind U.S. statements on the POW issue, the Pentagon could only respond that the interview was an "enemy propaganda film."

Pilots well-treated

Information received from U.S. POWs in the North, therefore, indicates that they are well-treated and live busy and healthy lives, and that at least some have become convinced through discussions among fellow POWs that the war should be ended immediately.

• (7) Representatives of U.S. peace groups who have visited POW camps in the DRV or who have received information about POWs in Paris and Hanoi—A great deal of information about POWs has been supplied by North Vietnam to U.S. groups who are working toward an end to the Vietnam conflict.

This information has included names and entire lists of those held in the DRV, chances to observe conditions first-hand in POW camps, and statements from the government of North Vietnam on the POW issue. They have also brought hundreds of letters, cards and small packages into the DRV for the prisoners, and returned to the U.S. with a similar number of these items for POW relatives and friends.

Similar information has also been provided in written form to several anti-war Senators, particularly J. William Fulbright and Edward Kennedy. Both Senators recently received official lists of U.S. prisoners held in the North, for example. Another member of Congress received assurances from North Vietnamese officials in Laos that U.S. prisoners in the North are well-treated and were given special privileges this Christmas season.

Holidays in Vietnam

Three members of the Committee of Liaison with Families of Servicemen Detained in North Vietnam, an American peace group, spent the Christmas holidays in North Vietnam and reported that the POWs they met in the one camp they visited were in good physical condition, were eating well, were leading a relaxed existence, and participated in sports and music sessions every morning.

"The five POWs we spoke to had very ruddy skin, just like college boys ready to go out on the football field," reported Committee member Trudi Young. She also said that one prisoner said to her that he was eating better than the Vietnamese around him, and that another stated: "One thing we want you to know is that we're really fine and well looked after."

The information and first-hand evidence brought to public attention by peace groups, anti-war political leaders and others is so complimentary toward North Vietnam and so damning of the falsehoods of the POW campaign, in fact, that only one bit of information from these sources has been twisted around into a condemnation of the treatment of the POWs.

Anti-war lawyers

This was the fact supplied by the North Vietnamese to anti-war activist Sidney Peck and anti-war New York lawyer Peter Weiss that 17 American military men had died in the North. In fact, although this information was revealed by Peck and

Weiss two days after the raid was held, the Nixon administration twisted around this fact into a justification for the November 1970 Sontay POW raid deep into the North, giving a good example of how the POW campaign and information supplied by Hanoi is being used by the U.S. government and military for criminal acts.

The actual facts about the 17 deaths are made clear by attorney Weiss who, shortly after the release of his information from Hanoi, attacked the claim that the men died in prison camps and the implication that they were mistreated "as an almost total lie. It may be that some died in captivity. But the figure 17 refers to Americans who died in one of several ways—the most likely is when their plane was shot down they were killed or seriously wounded and were found dead.

"Another possibility is that they were suffering from severe wounds and died from their wounds. A third possibility is that they didn't land anywhere near a populated area but wandered around the mountains and eventually died of exposure and lack of food and were discovered dead. And the fourth possibility is that they died in captivity. Out of at least 339 prisoners officially recognized by the DRV, some of whom have been in captivity since 1965, some will die...

"The fact is that they made it clear when they released the names that these figures for dead people referred to all these categories . . ."

Records excepted

At the time of the Sontay raid, a Washington official with "access to all governmental information concerning the prisoners" confirmed for the Boston Globe that, with the exception of the Peck and Weiss reports, there had been no other information pointing toward alleged "maltreatment."

Weiss also stated that virtually all available evidence points to very humane treatment of Americans held by the DRV and the National Liberation Front (NLF). Catholic University professor John Van

Dyke, in his article in the Oct. 6, 1969 issue of the Nation, concluded from the evidence available from released POWs that the death rate among U.S. POWs is far lower than it was in Japanese and U.S. POW camps during the Second World War, and in no way compares to the brutality employed by U.S. and South Vietnamese troops against NLF and DRV prisoners in the South.

Simple evidence

The facts are simple. Evidence brought out by Americans visiting the DRV is that American POWs are well-treated in all aspects of their existence from food to health care to recreation. Though some have died in captivity, this has been generally due to wounds suffered in battle, and none has been shown to have resulted from mistreatment while in POW camps.

This conclusion is reinforced by information obtained from the government of the DRV, letters or other communications from the POWs, former POWs released by the DRV, or from statements by individuals, organizations, government officials or Pentagon spokesmen, all three of which must rely on the former four for their factual information.

Since these are the only sources of information known to exist on the POW issue, the only viable conclusion to be drawn from all of this is the POWs are in fact not mistreated, and that though they may not be eating steak and potatoes every night, they have adequate facilities, food, medical care, recreational and intellectual opportunities, and the like.

The first contention voiced across the United States by the U.S. government and the members of the "Tell It to Hanoi Committee" was that American POWs held in the North are mistreated. Clearly, from the abundant evidence we have examined, this contention is false.

Tomorrow: Some other contentions on POWs



"I was just following orders...."