THESIS

THE UNKNOWN MAN OF THE VIETNAM WAR: HOW PHAM VAN DONG CHANGED THE LIFE OF AMERICAN PRISONERS OF WAR

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ABSTRACT

THE UNKNOWN MAN OF THE VIETNAM WAR: HOW PAHM VAN DONG CHANGED THE LIFE OF AMERICAN PRISONERS OF WAR

During the Vietnam War, hundreds of American soldiers were taken as prisoners of war (POWs) by the North Vietnamese. Upon capture, these POWs were treated horribly, as the rights granted to them through the Geneva Conventions of 1949 were not being followed. The food quality, living and sanitary conditions, and medical care were all poor. Torture was prominent in these camps as well. After 1969, however, conditions immediately began to improve, and torture essentially stopped. These changes occurred in the POW camps after the death of North Vietnamese President Ho Chi Minh, but the correlation between his death and the change of treatment in POWs has been left unanswered in the historical literature.

This thesis is going to provide an interpretation of how the death of Ho Chi Minh affected the treatment of POWs. I will be making this argument through two historical lenses: the social and the political. Through a social perspective, I will use the auto-biographies and stories of POWs who recounted their time in North Vietnam to understand the shift in treatment. I will be examining the change in food quality, living and hygiene conditions, medical treatment, and why torture stopped. On the other hand, I will be exploring the political makeup of North Vietnam, and how the political structure and prominent figures, most notably President Ho Chi Minh and Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, influenced the treatment of POWs.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

On August 5, 1964, Commander Everett Alvarez Jr. was shot down from his plane during a mission over North Vietnam. Alvarez survived the crash, only to find himself surrounded by the Viet Cong, an aggressive, communist guerilla force that supported North Vietnam, marking the first of 3,113 days as an American prisoner of war (POW) in North Vietnam. During his years in captivity, Alvarez witnessed fellow soldiers starve to death, endure beatings and torture by camp guards, and saw them wither away without a final word to their families. Paralyzed by fear for his own wellbeing, he felt helpless to intervene. While America was engaged in a war that some now call a tragedy of epic proportions, the U.S. had no time or resources to devote to rescuing Alvarez.[1] From 1964-1969, hundreds of American pilots, including Alvarez, were captured, held and tortured as POWs in North Vietnam. After 1969, however, the number of pilots taken significantly decreased, and conditions improved for POWs who remained in captivity. Why? Why did the number of captures decrease so rapidly after 1969? Why did the treatment of prisoners of war change after 1969? Why was 1969 the turning point for the biggest shift in treatment of POWs? Many Vietnam War historians have asked this question, yet a suitable answer has not been found.

[1] Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam, A History* (Penguin Books, 1997), xii, 11.

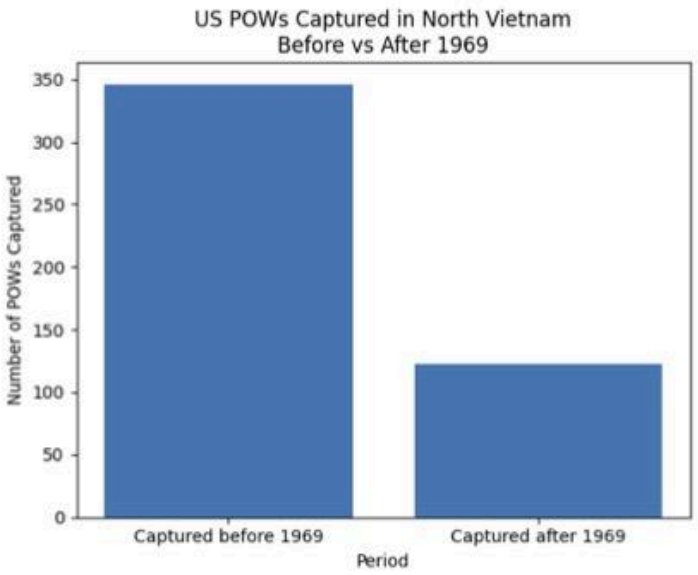

Table 1.1. This table shows the amount of American Prisoners of War captured in North Vietnam during American involvement, before and after 1969.[2]

The treatment of POWs was heavily influenced by Ho Chi Minh, president of North Vietnam during the war. While overseeing the treatment of POWs was not his primary duty, Ho was the primary authority for how POWs were to be treated while in captivity. Rather than adhering to the agreed upon laws of the Geneva Conventions, the series of laws that set the standard treatment of POWs, Ho ignored the laws and subjected them to inhumane treatment. In 1969, Ho Chi Minh died from a heart attack. Subsequently, one of his successors, Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, chose to carefully adhere to the laws of the Geneva Conventions, which resulted in the better treatment of American POWs.

[2] To make this table, I found a chart through the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA), a service dedicated to keeping track of those killed in action (KIA) as well as those missing in action (MIA). Through the DPAA, a department dedicated entirely to different wars and geographic locations. Applicable to my research is The Personnel Missing - Southeast Asia (PMSEA) list. This chart consisted of 684 entries of military personnel either MIA or KIA during the Vietnam War in North Vietnam, South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. So, to make the bar graph presented above, I used the AI software ChatGPT to sort through the data the entire chart provided. I first uploaded the PMSEA list to the software, and asked that it sort the given information to tell me the amount of POWs captured before and after 1969. After I was provided with the official numbers, 346 POWs captured before 1969, 123 captured after 1969, totaling 469 POWs captured in North Vietnam, I had AI create a chart based on these numbers to showcase the significant decrease in POWs captured after 1969.

Methodology

This project began as an investigation into the type of medical care American soldiers received during their service in the Vietnam War. I wanted to understand the differences between the care they received, and the training medics had. More specifically, I wanted to look at the role of women in the Vietnam War through a medical lens. I used the archives from the Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, where I stumbled upon interviews from POWs including James Collins and Sam Johnson. Originally, my focus was on how these soldiers were cared for if they were injured, but I found myself drawn to their personal stories about their time as POWs. I began reading a variety of interviews with POWs, and I was drawn back to the same question: why was there this sudden shift of their treatment in 1969? This question ultimately formed the basis of my thesis.

As shown by the sources I used, many POWs chose to write their autobiographies about their time in North Vietnam upon their return home. Some felt as if their stories were important enough to share, while others used it as a way to work through or navigate their experience. One pattern I found among these autobiographies and stories, is the acknowledgement of a significant shift in their treatment following Ho Chi Minh's death in 1969. While reading these sources, I noticed this trend, and after consulting secondary sources, both scholarly and non-scholarly, I discovered this question had still not been answered.

Throughout my thesis, I have focused on two primary schools of thought surrounding prisoners of war: the social lens, and the political lens. In order to understand why the treatment changed, it was important to recognize how the treatment was before 1969. Establishing this level of knowledge allowed me to see just how significant these changes were, and gave me the tools to share this information with my readers. To me, the treatment of POWs and their

experience of living through the changes, represents the social lens; whereas the political lens offers the "why" of this thesis. Combining these two areas of focus, I was able to come up with a conclusion that I believe is heavily supported by a wide array of evidence.

In terms of the scope of my research, I was limited to POWs taken to camps in North Vietnam. So, what I have put together here is not applicable to prisoners of war in South Vietnam, in the jungle, in Laos, or in Cambodia. If I were to extend my research, I would focus on POWs in these locations as well and determine if there were similarities surrounding their treatment before and after the death of Ho Chi Minh.

Learning about the lives of the POWs was extremely important to this thesis, as well as understanding the Vietnamese government structure on a more in-depth level. The correlation between these two ideas have been overlooked by many historians. As I proposed, it was the government who had the final authority over the treatment of POWs, meaning the government was also responsible for the changes in their treatment after the death of Ho Chi Minh. Drawing on the relationship between Ho Chi Minh and Pham Van Dong, I have presented a convincing argument for the sudden change in prisoners' treatment; something other historians have not fully explained.

While many military historians have addressed the topic of the Vietnam War, most omit discussions of POWs altogether, leaving the question of why treatment dramatically improved for POWs in 1969. One consistent mention across military histories of the Vietnam War is that of the death of Ho Chi Minh.[3] Although the connection was not clearly stated among historians, the idea that Ho's death correlated to the improved treatment of POWs is a recurring theme within the literature. Historians who have specifically studied American POWs in Vietnam have made this connection within their own writing, yet they rarely delve into the reasons supporting it.

[3] Please see bibliography for monographs, books, and other sources that discuss the death of Ho Chi Minh.

Military historians Geoffrey Wawro and Stanley Karnow examine the Vietnam War in its entirety. Geoffrey Wawro's book, *The Vietnam War: A Military History,* provides an essential background of the Vietnam War, arguing that "Vietnam was a war of choice. The United States was not provoked into war, and none of the Cold War justifications of containment or the 'domino theory' required the U.S. military to intervene."[4] Beginning his analysis in 1949, four years after the end of WWII, Wawro explored the rising tensions between countries in Southeast Asia, and how those developments ultimately led to American involvement in Vietnam. His book is broken down thematically, looking at the progression of the war up until 1975. Wawro began a section of his book titled, "Hamburger Hill," which focuses on President Richard Nixon's entry into office in 1969. Using once-private conversations between President Nixon and his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, Wawro discusses a new strategy that Nixon intended to implement, saying he, "had a secret plan to stop the war, fast."[5] Wawro delves further into the types of policy changes Nixon wanted to put into action, discussing different military operations that were to take effect: Vietnamization, and search and destroy missions. Within the strategy and tactical talk, there was only a brief mention of the death of North Vietnamese President Ho Chi Minh, and how his death in September of 1969 caused panic among the North Vietnamese people.[6] Wawro continues to discuss how Ho's death shifted military strategy and decisions in North Vietnam, as well as the course of action Nixon took because of Ho's death, but does not mention any correlation between the death of Ho, and the sudden change in the treatment of POWs.[7]

Karnow approaches his writing similarly to Wawro, as he follows the same thematic structure, and likewise argues that, "the wars that ravaged Vietnam were a human tragedy of

[4] Geoffrey Wawro, *The Vietnam War: A Military History* (Basic Books, 2024), 1.
[5] Wawro, *The Vietnam War,* 349.
[6] Wawro, *The Vietnam War,* 399.
[7] Across the literature surrounding the Vietnam War, there is no consensus on how to properly write Asian names. So, throughout my thesis, I will be using a mix of 'Ho Chi Minh' and 'Ho,' as well as either 'Pham Van Dong,' or 'Pham.' It does not seem like historians refer to these political figures solely by their last names.

appalling proportions," partially caused by an unnecessary American involvement.[8] Since 1983, Karnow has continued to write, edit, and publish new editions of his book as additional information emerges. One missing key point of Karnow's editions is the explanation for the shift in treatment of POWs. Like Wawro, Karnow mentions the death of Ho, and how his death "inspired a burst of emotional mourning in North Vietnam."[9] However, Karnow does not mention POWs, nor does he mention OPERATION HOMECOMING, the operation at the end of the war which resulted in all American POWs being released.

In order to understand the treatment of POWs, historians have taken two approaches: the political lens, and the POW lens. The historians who have taken the political route examine the ways in which prominent leaders in both Vietnam and the United States viewed the POW issue. In contrast, historians using the POW lens rely on autobiographies written by actual POWs to understand the treatment they received. Further, they used the political and economic state of the country to understand why POWs may have been treated in a particular way.[10] Historian Tom Pendergast does a great job establishing brief biographies about the key figures of the Vietnam War.

Devoting an entire section to biographies, Pendergast discusses most of the figures previously mentioned, but one key figure is missing: Pham Van Dong. Pham Vong Dong was Prime Minister in North Vietnam and was the primary spokesman of the government after the death of Ho Chi Minh. It was ultimately Pham who united the country, but his legacy and policy, and even his name, is scarcely mentioned in the literature about the war. Pham led North

[8] Karnow, *Vietnam,* xii, 11.
[9] Karnow, *Vietnam,* 612.
[10] For examples of political approaches, see *Vietnam: A Political History* by Joseph Buttinger, *Ho Chi Minh and His Vietnam: a Personal Memoir* by Jean Sainteny, and *Government and Revolution in Vietnam* by Dennis J. Duncanson. For examples of the social approaches, see *Voices of the Vietnam POWs: Witness to Their Fight,* by Craig Howes.

Vietnam's war efforts for six years, yet his policy and tactics are not discussed. Other historians, such as Bruce Palmer Jr., do not mention Pham at all.[11]

In 1958, Pham Van Dong, second in command to Ho Chi Minh and Prime Minister of North Vietnam, signed the Geneva Conventions on behalf of the country of Vietnam. In this newly updated form of the conventions, there was a section titled, "Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War." This section provided hundreds of pages discussing the ways in which POWs should be treated if captured, mandating that they receive humane treatment, would be quartered under favorable conditions, provided high-quality food, and given sufficient medical attention if needed.[12] Although North Vietnam agreed to adhere to these conditions, they were not upheld once POWs were in North Vietnamese custody. Rather than viewing the captured Americans as prisoners of war, Ho Chi Minh labeled them as, "war criminals," which provided justification for the North Vietnamese to ignore the rules of the Geneva Conventions.[13] As a result, the Viet Cong got away with beating and torturing POWs, starving them, withholding adequate medical care, and overall providing a quality of life that was truly appalling.

Pham is often overlooked by military and political historians because he did not become president after Ho's death. This resulted in some confusion over his role resulting in the release of American POWs. While historians have debated the policies and the involvement of Ho Chi Minh and American politicians, Pham's influence is often cast aside. Even with written accounts of the POW experiences published after Ho Chi Minh's death, Pham's impact is commonly overlooked. In 1970, for example, there was a raid planned to remove POWs from Viet Cong imprisonment. Historian Justin Williamson examines this raid, known as OPERATION IVORY

[11] Bruce Palmer Jr., *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (University Press of Kentucky, 1984).
[12] International Committee of the Red Cross, *The Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949*. Geneva, Switzerland: International Committee of the Red Cross, 87, 91, 93.
[13] Craig Howes, *Voices of the Vietnam POWs: Witnesses to Their Fight* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 35-36.

COAST, in his book *Son Tay 1970: The Operation Ivory Coast POW Rescue Mission.* Williamson argued that, "Americans faced torture or execution when captured," which was true when Ho Chi Minh was in power.[14] OPERATION IVORY COAST came to fruition because of said torture. Not mentioned in Williamson's book, however, was how Pham was in power during this operation.

It is established that after the death of Ho Chi Minh, treatment of POWs changed. The reasoning for this, however, is still debated to this day. Historian Stuart I. Rochester in his book *The Battle Behind Bars: Navy and Marine POWs in the Vietnam War,* argues that the "sudden death of Ho Chi Minh on 2 September likely facilitated the regime's reexamination of its own POW policies."[15] Rochester then takes the step further, and adds to his argument by suggesting that, "through 1970, the Vietnamese relaxed regulations," within the POW camps.[16] Rochester is not wrong in stating this, yet he does not provide an explanation for why they relaxed regulations.

Similarly, historian John G. Hubbell devoted the entirety of his research to American POWs. Although the topic is heavy, Hubbell wrote his book *A Definitive History of the American Prisoner-of-War Experience in Vietnam, 1964-1973: P.O.W.,* arguing that, "the American POW experience in Vietnam is part of our heritage, and Americans ought to know about it."[17] Despite doing extensive research on the camps, the prisoners, and the policies, there was one thing Hubbell was not able to figure out: "the possible reasons for the treatment change of POWs in late 1969."[18] Hubbell's book was one of the first written about POWs during the Vietnam War.

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[14] Justin W. Williamson, *Son Tay 1970: The Operation Ivory Coast POW Rescue Mission* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024), 4.
[15] Stuart I. Rochester, *The Battle Behind Bars: Navy and Marine POWs in the Vietnam War* (Naval History & Heritage Command, 2015), 58.
[16] Rochester, *The Battle Behind Bars,* 58.
[17] John G. Hubbell, *A Definitive History of the American Prisoner-of-War Experience in Vietnam, 1964-1973: P.O.W.* (The Reader's Digest Association, 1976), xiii.
[18] Hubbell, *A Definitive History*, 519.

The literature has since rapidly expanded, as both historians and non-historians work to understand this historical time period. It is important to note, however, that the literature surrounding POWs is an equal mix of scholarly and non-scholarly, both of which I employ in my thesis.

More recently, Hubbell wrote a chapter in historian Craig Howes' *Voices of the Vietnam War: Witnesses to Their Fight,* in which he uses interviews and memoirs to compile his monograph. Hubbell states that in, "September 1969, Ho Chi Minh died, and torture basically ended."[19] Once again, Hubbell does not offer a reason for why this may be the case. It is also important to note that torture did not end completely, it just changed forms and intensity.[20] Howes' book also tells the stories of American POWs, and how their lives changed over the course of the Vietnam War. Howes does a good job discussing the day-to-day lives of POWs North Vietnam, yet he does not pinpoint the reason for the change in treatment, a common theme amongst both historians and non-historians writing about the Vietnam War.

In a more recent book written about POWs, historians Tom Wilber and Jerry Lembcke recount the stories of POWs from their time of capture to their time of release, while arguing that, "the abrupt cessation of torture in late 1969 was due to the death of devilish Ho Chi Minh."[21] There is no further mention, however, of how his successors continued his legacy, and why his death sparked such a change. Regardless of the year research was done, the idea that Ho's death was the catalyst for the change is expressed across the majority of POW literature.[22]

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[19] Howes, *Voices of the Vietnam POWs*, 103.
[20] In many POWs autobiographies, they discuss that things do get better, but better is a relative term. Medical care was still inadequate, alongside the food provided, and even though they were not tortured through violence, there were multiple other ways in which the living standard did not meet the minimum laws required by the Geneva convention.
[21] Tom Wilber and Jerry Lembcke, *From Vietnam's Hoa Lo Prison to America Today: Dissenting POWs,* (Monthly Review Press, 2021), 122.
[22] Prisoner of War autobiographies can be found in footnotes in chapters one, two, three, and four, the conclusion, and the bibliography.

Both historians and non-historians have acknowledged the change in the treatment, but none of them have been able to pinpoint why this change took place. Before Ho Chi Minh's death in 1969, POWs were interrogated, tortured, beaten, and denied any promises granted through the Geneva Conventions. After Ho's death, however, treatment of POWs improved drastically. Following his death, the communist North Vietnamese government had to restructure. The government structure shifted from a single, primary leader to a collective leadership, in which Prime Minister Pham Van Dong gained more control, specifically with military operations and peace negotiations. This leads me to believe that he was the driving force behind the change in how POWs were treated.

Initially, the majority of orders concerning treatment of POWs came from Ho Chi Minh, who viewed them as war criminals. With such a tight hold on the way POWs were treated, Ho Chi Minh forbade any release of news coverage regarding the POWs. He saw POWs as both a bargaining chip, and a way to create propaganda for his country. Knowing that the United States government would not abandon their own troops in North Vietnam, North Vietnam gained leverage in having POWs during their negotiations.

Ho Chi Minh wanted American troops gone, but this was not his end goal. Rather, American removal was a means to an end. Regardless of the presence of the American military, Ho continued fighting to create his communist regime. This is where Pham Van Dong diverges. Rather than attempting to wear down American troops for an eventual surrender like Ho, Pham wanted all American troops out of Vietnam.[23] By removing American troops from North Vietnam, the North could accelerate its takeover of the South, and it was primarily through American aid and support that South Vietnam was able to remain standing. Pham knew the United States was exhausted, but the pride of the country and the President meant they would

[23] James H. Willbanks, *Vietnam: The Course of a Conflict* (Army University Press, 2018), 5.

never give up. In an effort to secure full withdrawal of the U.S. from Vietnam, Pham initiated peace negotiations with the United States out of Vietnam entirely, Pham instigated peace negotiations with Ho's presidential replacement Le Duan and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, making the treatment of POWs a requirement for the removal of American forces – an issue that will be discussed further in my thesis. Due to the prospect of U.S. removal, the POW camp guards began complying with the Geneva Conventions, which resulted in the treatment changed after the death of Ho Chi Minh.

The notable lack of discussion about Pham Van Dong and his influence on POW treatment after he took over Vietnam War policy for Ho Chi Minh provides the foundation for this thesis. Although there will be essential background information provided about the Vietnam War in chapter one, beginning in the nineteenth century, the bulk of my thesis will be focused on the years 1964-1973, with the removal of the last American POW from Vietnam.

The parameters of this study will remain within the geographical location of North Vietnam, with brief mentions of South Vietnam and France; specifically, the prisoner of war camps in North Vietnam.[24] I will not be discussing the prisoners of war taken across Southeast Asia, including those in South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.[25] To make my argument, I will be using a wide variety of historical sources including oral interviews, autobiographies, documentaries, secondary literature, both scholarly and non-scholarly, as well as letters, speeches, photographs, and drawings. The most important and most consistently referenced sources will be the autobiographies written by the POWs about their time as a prisoner, and speeches and reports from the North Vietnamese government. POWs have acknowledged that a

[24] See figure 1.3 in chapter one.
[25] For more information on prisoners of war across Southeast Asia, as well as prisoners of war of different ethnicities, I suggest Craig Howes' *Voices of Vietnam POWS: Witnesses to Their Fight.*

change occurred, but similar to the historians who have written about them, they remain unsure of the underlying reason.

The structure of my thesis is as follows: Chapter one will provide a synopsis of the Vietnam War, beginning with the military history of Vietnam before American involvement. This contributes to the understanding of how Americans became involved, and more significantly, how American troops ended up being taken as POWs. Next, I will give a brief description of the POW camps, where POWs spent the majority of their time. Chapter two will provide a more in-depth description of the camps, as well as the treatment of POWs prior to 1969, including the living conditions of the camps, the food provided, the quality of hygiene, quality of medical care, and the type of torture encountered. This will be compared against the standards set by the Geneva Conventions to determine how far North Vietnam strayed from their guidelines. Chapter three will serve as an interlude, focusing on the government structure of North Vietnam, the death of Ho Chi Minh, the reaction to the death of Ho Chi Minh, and how these circumstances led to Pham Van Dong being the driving force behind the change in the treatment of POWs. I will examine Pham's involvement in the war-peace negotiations, and how compliance with the Geneva Conventions played a pivotal role in the treatment. Further, this section will include the bulk of the political analysis. Chapter four will circle back to the treatment of POWs, and how it improved significantly following the death of Ho. It will examine how food, hygiene, and medical treatments improved, and how torture was nearly eliminated, bringing treatment more closely in line with the Geneva Conventions. Finally, my conclusion will examine the release of POWs, and how treatment of POWs looks in the twenty-first century. Overall, this thesis is an analysis of the treatment of American POWs in North Vietnam, focusing on how and why that

treatment shifted after the death of North Vietnamese President Ho Chi Minh, highlighting the role of Prime Minister Pham Van Dong in these changes.

Chapter One: How Did We Get Here?

"We acted according to what we thought were the principles and traditions of this nation. We made our decisions in light of those values. Yet we were wrong, terribly wrong."
- From *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* by Robert McNamara, United States Secretary of War

Long before American involvement, there was war in Vietnam. In 1858, European religious missions were on the rise. France tasked themselves with converting the Vietnamese to Catholicism, but after hearing the news that two of their missionaries were murdered, France took immediate military action, beginning the almost century-long occupation of Vietnam. Throughout the nineteenth century and well into the early twentieth century, France expanded their power across Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, ultimately transforming these countries.[26] Leading up to the start of World War II, Vietnamese nationalists tirelessly fought against French occupation. In 1940, however, the Vietnamese watched their colonial masters surrender to Nazi Germany, indicating what appeared to be an end to outside occupation of Vietnam.[27] This surrender temporarily ended foreign occupation of Vietnam, but the Japanese wasted no time filling this position, keeping Vietnam a colonized nation. It was not until the end of WWII that both France and Japan realized their inability to address the poverty crises in Vietnam that stemmed from years of war colonization, so the reins were handed over to the Viet Minh: a communist political party led by Ho Chi Minh, the soon-to-be president of North Vietnam.[28]

Every moment of Ho's life shaped his path into becoming a political leader. In 1890, Ho Chi Minh was brought into the world as Nguyen Sinh Cung, and was, "born into an atmosphere of rebellion."[29] Ho Chi Minh looked up to his father, Nguyễn Sinh Sắc, who emphasized his hate for French occupation in Vietnam, while simultaneously claiming that communism was, "an

[26] Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns, *The Vietnam War: An Intimate History* (Vintage Books, 2020), 15.
[27] Burns and Ward, *The Vietnam War*, 17.
[28] Burns and Ward, *The Vietnam War*, 20.
[29] Anthony O. Edmonds. *The War in Vietnam* (Greenwood Press, 1998), 27.

inherent way to eliminate inequalities in the Mandarin system."[30] Further, his father denounced the French, telling Ho to stay loyal to his nationalist beliefs if he were going to win over the people.[31] Growing up immersed in these ideologies, it is clear why Ho was drawn to politics. In 1920, at the age of thirty, Ho Chi Minh made what would prove to be a significant decision and joined the communist party. He studied Leninism and Marxism, traveling to both Paris and the Soviet Union.[32] Ho's time in Paris only deepened his commitment, "towards a route that led back to the powerhouse of communist ideology," as the French were engaged more with colonial politics than communist ideologies.[33] During WWII, it was Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh that fed the hungry, and assisted in the survival of the poor population while France and Japan were engaged in battle. When Japan officially surrendered on September 2, 1945, the day became known as Vietnamese Independence Day. Hundreds of thousands of people gathered to hear Ho Chi Minh speak, as he supported the common people during the war, and promised independence indefinitely for the people of Vietnam.

Simultaneous to Vietnamese Independence Day, the uneasy alliance between the United States and the Soviet Union fell apart. Concern about Soviet ideology, such as communism, increasingly grew. At first, concern over the spread of communism was primarily focused on European countries and ensuring that Western Europe did not fall under communistic control. After Mao Zedong overthrew the Chinese government and established communism, however, concerns about the spread of communism expanded to Asia as well.[34] This resulted in the French returning to Vietnam, as they believed Vietnam could not fight the spread of communism without

[30] Edmonds, *The War in Vietnam,* 28.
[31] Clive Hills and Virginia Morris, *Ho Chi Minh's Blueprint for Revolution: In the Words of Vietnamese Strategists and Operatives* (McFarland & Company, 2018), 7.
[32] Brian Knappenberger, *Turning Point: The Vietnam War*, episode two, "Civil War," Luminant Media, April 30, 2025, Netflix, 00:02:27-00:04:57.
[33] Hills, *Ho Chi Minh's Blueprint,* 14.
[34] Burns and Ward, *The Vietnam War*, 32.

their strength. After the French returned to Vietnam, they allied with the South to fight against communism rising in the North under Ho Chi Minh. It is unclear whether France wanted to fight back against communism, or if they wanted to maintain control of their overseas empire. Violence broke out once again, causing a Civil War between North and South Vietnam.

The concerns over the spread of communism led to the creation of what became known as the Domino Theory. President Dwight D. Eisenhower explained this concept as "you have a row of dominos set up, and you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly."[35] In other words, losing one country in a particular region could result in losing them all. In an effort to prevent the spread of communism into South Vietnam, President Eisenhower, "poured military and economic aid into South Vietnam to prove that he took the communist threat seriously," gave aid to the French, and aided in the expansion of the Army of the Republic of South Vietnam (ARVN) after the signing of the Geneva Conventions in 1954.[36]

Following nine more years of fighting, from 1945 to 1954, a temporary halt of the war occurred, and the countries involved attended the Geneva Peace conference. During this conference, the Geneva Accords were signed by political leaders of both North and South Vietnam. One of the most significant terms of the Geneva Accords was dividing Vietnam into two separate countries. The land above the 17th Parallel (a boundary line drawn out by the Geneva Accords) would become North Vietnam, run by Ho Chi Minh, and the land below would become South Vietnam, run by leader Ngo Dinh Diem. According to the Geneva Accords, the two separate entities of Vietnam were expected to take the time to restructure, and eventually

[35] Burns and Ward, *The Vietnam War*, 41.
[36] Wawro, *The Vietnam War,* 12.

reunify under one government before the end of 1956. When 1956 came, the two countries were to hold an election to see who would be the leader of the one, unified, Vietnam.[37]

Figure 1.1: A map of Vietnam during the Vietnam War, showing both where the country split, and how the Ho Chi Minh Trail connected multiple countries.[38]

As the election grew near, however, President Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam, grew wary at the thought of reunification under one government, as he knew he would lose. As such, Diem claimed that South Vietnam would, "not participate in talks with the North unless it renounced 'terrorism' and 'totalitarian methods.'"[39] The United States supported South Vietnam not participating in the election, as they also knew Ho Chi Minh would win. This disrupted the plan of reunification, as Ho was adamantly opposed to any government except that of a communist one. Ultimately, the reunification of the countries did not take place in 1956, and tensions between North and South Vietnam increased. Members of the Viet Minh began covertly

[37] Knappenberger, "Civil War," at 00:10:29.
[38] Phearak Kruy, "17th Parallel Dividing North Vietnam and South Vietnam," Research Gate, 2019, https://www.researchgate.net/figure/th-Parallel-dividing-North-Vietnam-and-South-Vietnam_fig5_364030812.
[39] Quote from Dinh Diem in Burns and Ward, *The Vietnam War*, 49.

moving into South Vietnam, attacking ARVN patrols and supplies provided by America.[40] In 1961, when John F. Kennedy (JFK) succeeded Eisenhower in office, he was "horrified by the situation," in regard to Vietnam and international affairs.[41] Unsure of how to move forward, Kennedy continued to supply money to South Vietnam, while simultaneously sending over 15,000 military advisors."[42] As the years went on, the Viet Cong (VC) became increasingly more present in South Vietnam, yet American troops had not been instructed to participate in ground combat.[43] Then, in 1963, Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas.

The American people were devastated. Filling Kennedy's shoes was Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ), who, prior to JFK's assassination, did not participate in the politics surrounding American involvement in Vietnam, or the tensions between North and South Vietnam. Now, being in the position to make such crucial decisions, Johnson vowed, "I am not going to lose Vietnam. I am not going to be the president who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went."[44] It was this unshakeable mindset that won LBJ the election in 1964, thus marking a turning point in the United States' involvement in Vietnam.

The year of LBJ's election coincided with what is known as the Gulf of Tonkin incident. To this day, the Gulf of Tonkin incident provokes debate between historians, as they work to uncover exactly what transpired. On August 2 and August 4, 1964, American troops were assigned in the gulf to gather intelligence signals from North Vietnam and share them with South Vietnam. Historians, including Pendergast, have argued that, "when the American destroyer *Maddox* swept through the area [the Tonkin Gulf] on a surveillance patrol, North Vietnamese

[40] Burns and Ward, *The Vietnam War*, 56.
[41] Wawro, *The Vietnam War,* 15.
[42] Wawro, *The Vietnam War,* 15.
[43] To the North Vietnamese, the Viet Cong were known as the National Liberation Front (NLF). Outsiders, such as the Americans and the South Vietnamese, used the phrasing, "Viet Cong," as a slur towards those fighting in the North Vietnamese military, meaning 'Vietnamese Communists.'
[44] Wawro, *The Vietnam War,* 25.

naval boats allegedly opened fire on the *Maddox*, causing minor damage."[45] Historians such as Wawro, who agree with this sentiment, take the analysis even further. Wawro does note that the *Maddox* was under fire, but he claimed that it was a consequence of America's own actions. There had been no international agreement made until 1982 in regard to territorial waters, so the United States pushed its luck, sending the boats within four to five miles of the Vietnamese coast.[46] The goal with getting this close to the coast was to gather military intelligence information through technology that would potentially pick up North Vietnamese radios as well as other forms of military communications. LBJ admitted that, "his administration had provoked the attacks with its own covert operations against North Vietnamese radar sites."[47]

On August 4, two days following the initial attack, military officials in Vietnam claimed that they had been attacked by the North Vietnamese again. There was little evidence to support this claim, as the only action that occurred during the alleged attack was American ships firing guns into the gulf. LBJ admitted that, "for all I know, our navy was shooting at whales out there."[48] Regardless of what actually happened during what came to be known as the Gulf of Tonkin incident, America used this as a way to gradually get more involved in Vietnam through two methods: telling the American public that their troops had been attacked, and that retaliation through force was the only way to keep communism from spreading.

Coincidentally, it was the day after the second Gulf of Tonkin incident that the first American aviator was captured during the Vietnam War. Commander Everett Alvarez Jr., was shot down from his airplane on August 5, 1964.[49] It is important to note that this occurred before Johnson sent ground combat troops to Vietnam, as Alvarez would be by himself for a long time

[45] Tom Pendergast, *Defining Moments: The Vietnam War* (Omniographics Inc., 2007), 36.
[46] Wawro, *The Vietnam War,* 40.
[47] A quote from President Lyndon B. Johnson in Wawro, *The Vietnam War,* 40.
[48] Pendergast, *Defining Moments,* 37.
[49] John T. Mason and Etta Belle Kitchen, *Prisoner of War Series, Vol. II*, II vols. (U.S. Naval Institute, 1976), 1.

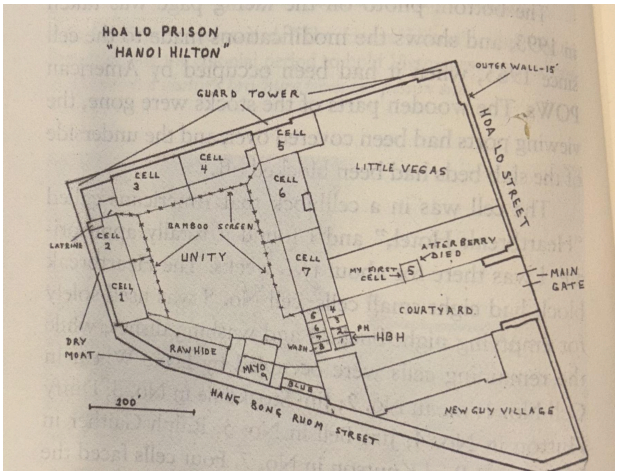
in the camps before receiving any company. Alvarez was in the Laotian area, which happened to intersect with the Ho Chi Minh trail, and connected the country of Laos to both North and South Vietnam.[50] It was not until the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964 that Alvarez and the United States military even considered advancing toward North Vietnam.

With American escalation in Vietnam following the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the American military carried out OPERATION ROLLING THUNDER. The Viet Cong (VC) began launching attacks and invading South Vietnam in 1965. This was quickly followed by an attack on American facilities, which wounded seventy-two Americans, and killed four, which provoked a strong response by the U.S.[51] The United States began a series of air raids against the North Vietnamese, in hopes that continuous attacks would cause them to surrender. The plan did not work the way the American government hoped. Instead, it only escalated the situation. OPERATION ROLLING THUNDER continued until 1968, relying on the idea that if the U.S. put enough air pressure on the North Vietnamese, they would eventually back down. In addition to the air raids, American troops were sent to Vietnam to protect South Vietnamese ambassadors from attack, in what came to be known as Mission Creep. On March 8, 1965, "3,500 American marines landed on the beach in Danang. These were the first armed U.S. combat troops to enter Vietnam."[52] From that point on, the number only continued to increase. By the Spring of 1969, there were 543,400 American troops stationed in Vietnam.[53] Hundreds of these American troops, mostly Air Force pilots, became prisoners of war.

Unfortunately, after Alvarez was shot down, hundreds of other pilots shared his fate following OPERATION ROLLING THUNDER. Because Alvarez was the first pilot taken into

[50] Refer to figure 1.1.
[51] Pendergast, *Defining Moments,* 38.
[52] Pendergast, *Defining Moments,* 41.
[53] Pendergast, *Defining Moments,* 41.

captivity, his perspective offers a unique insight on the 'being captured process.' Following Alvarez's capture, the VC put him on display, where the North Vietnamese could observe him, as if he were a showpiece.[54] Although it became common practice for POWs, Alvarez was the first to experience being taken in the middle of the night, and placed in a local prison, where he was chained up. For approximately a week, Alvarez was moved to various locations throughout North Vietnam, until he ultimately ended up in Hanoi, and became the first prisoner to stay at the infamous POW camp that later came to be known as the Hanoi Hilton.[55] Before the North Vietnamese utilized the property as a prison camp for American POWs, it was a prison facility used by the French to house Vietnamese prisoners, including Prime Minister Pham Van Dong. It was at the Hanoi Hilton, where the majority of POWs would spend most of their time in captivity.



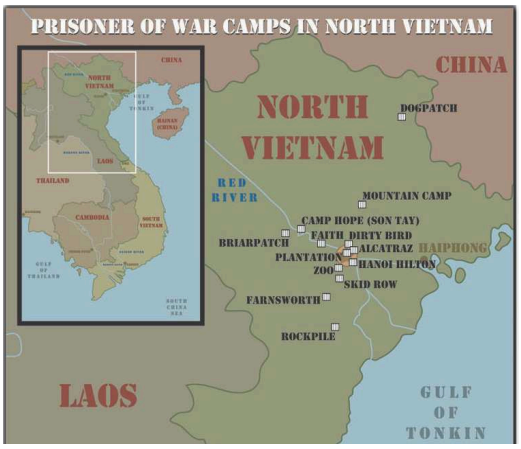


Figure 1.2 (left) is a floor plan of Hoa Lo Prison, including surrounding cellblocks.[56]
Figure 1.3 (right) is a map of North Vietnam and where the POW camps were geographically during the war.[57]

[54] Mason, *Prisoner of War Series,* 11.
[55] Mason, *Prisoner of War Series,* 19.
[56] Porter Alexander Halyburton, *Reflections on Captivity: A Tapestry of Stories by a Vietnam War POW* (Naval Institute Press, 2022), 18.
[57] "The 'Hanoi Hilton' and Other Prisons," National Museum of the United States Air Force, https://www.nationalmuseum.af.mil/Visit/Museum-Exhibits/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/197500/the-hanoi-hilton-and-other-prisons/#:~:text=U.S.%20Air%20Force)-,Return%20with%20Honor:%20American%20Prisoners%20of%20War%20in%20Southeast%20Asia,U.S.%20Air%20Force%20photo).

Prior to American involvement in the war, the Geneva Conventions had been signed by a multitude of countries, including America, North Vietnam, and South Vietnam. It is important to note, that it was not Ho Chi Minh who signed on behalf of his country, it was his close friend, financial advisor, and soon-to-be Prime Minister, Pham Van Dong. Whether Ho Chi Minh was unaware of, or willfully chose to ignore the new POW laws outlined in the Geneva Conventions, he failed to uphold them. The 1949 version of the Geneva Conventions specified the conditions and treatment that POWs were entitled to, including the quality of food, access to medical care, communication with their home countries, living quarter standards, and more. Ho Chi Minh ignored the majority of these policies, treating the American POWs as subhuman. This had been the norm since Alvarez' capture in 1964, but in 1969, this all changed.

The day that was once glorious to the Vietnamese people, marking their independence from France and Japan, soon became their worst nightmare. On September 2, 1969, what had previously been Vietnamese Independence Day, Ho Chi Minh died from a heart attack. Prior to his death, Ho suffered from other medical conditions which prompted other senior officials, including Pham, to serve as his delegates when he was too ill to attend meetings or gatherings. Although Ho had a solid support system within the government, Pham was more than that, as they were and had been very close friends for most of their lives. Pham had a very similar upbringing to Ho, and "he was deeply involved in the patriotic struggle of the intellectuals and people," devoting his life to communist ideologies.[58] While attending school, Pham enjoyed studying political science, especially Marxism and Leninism. As Pham got older, he gained a deeper understanding of French occupation and the political state of Vietnam and set his sights on French expulsion. This resulted in his imprisonment, but after his release, he fled to China, where he met Ho Chi Minh. Together, they formed the Viet Minh and the basis foundation of the

[58] Thu Tuong, *Pham Van Dong: Prime Minister* (VNA Publishing House, 2006), 24, 30.

communist party in Vietnam.[59] The two became inseparable. For the next thirty years, they lived and fought beside one another, and Pham spent a lot of time studying Ho's military strategies and ways of life. Because of their close friendship and the fact that the people of North Vietnam were already familiar with Pham, it seemed fitting for Pham to start making military decisions. After Ho's death, a lot of eyes shifted to Pham regarding the war both because of his previous role as Prime Minister, and because of his close relationship with Ho.[60] The underlying assumption was that Pham would follow the same political path as Ho. As I will discuss in chapter three, one of the primary distinctions in their policies was the treatment of POWs. Between 1969 and 1975, Pham's primary roles were pursuing diplomatic initiatives, all with the goal of American withdrawal.[61]

United States withdrawal from the war depended heavily on POWs. If the POWs were treated in accordance with the Geneva Conventions, which Pham signed himself, the United States government and military might be more willing to negotiate. Alternatively, if Pham could return the POWs in exchange for the withdrawal of American troops, Pham could ensure a communist take over of South Vietnam. After Ho's death, the POWs were used as a game piece to halt American involvement, but they were given treatment that echoed the rules listed in the Geneva Conventions.

In an effort to push for American withdrawal, POWs gradually received better treatment, beginning with moving them to the prisoner camp Son Tay, also known as Camp Hope. Camp Hope was located northeast of the Hanoi Hilton, and many POWs in their autobiographies have noted the improved conditions of this particular camp. In 1967, before the death of Ho, General Jack Singlaub with the American forces learned of the Camp at Son Tay, making note that it was

[59] James S. Olsen, ed., *Dictionary of the Vietnam War* (Greenwood Press, 1988), 364.
[60] Olsen, *Dictionary of the Vietnam War,* 364.
[61] Olsen, *Dictionary of the Vietnam War,* 364.

a location to watch as it was possible POWs were being held here. The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) monitored the area, and eventually captured a North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldier who claimed to be a cook for the POW camp near Son Tay. The NVA soldier stated that, "the camp had recreational items, the freedom to move around inside the camp, and even good relations with the camp staff."[62] As I will showcase in later chapters, this quality of the camp was proven false, but the soldier could have been saying these things to try and get away from those who captured him. With the information provided by the NVA soldier, the American military immediately crafted a rescue mission, which came to be known as OPERATION KINGPIN. After careful execution and planning, American pilots readied themselves to save their fellow soldiers. The mission, however, did not go as planned. The troops successfully made it into the camp, killing many of the guards, but the POWs were nowhere to be found. They had attacked the wrong camp, and the one where the POWs were being held was known as Camp Faith, which was 15 miles east from Camp Hope.[63] Prisoners were often moved in between camps in order to avoid something like OPERATION KINGPIN, which explains why they were at Camp Faith instead of Camp Hope during the raid.

This mission was a failure for three primary reasons: none of the POWs were rescued, and because of this failed attempt, there was concern that their treatment might worsen. Second, Pham and the Vietnamese government now knew that rescue attempts were underway, so there was no reason to let POWs go until he could be one hundred percent sure of American withdrawal. Finally, North Vietnam would now be prepared if another attempt at rescue were to happen. Americans did not attempt another rescue, and POWs did not return home until the Paris Peace Accords in 1973.

[62] Williamson, *Son Tay*, 6, 8.
[63] Williamson, *Son Tay*, 57.

Secretary of State Henry Kissinger created a ceasefire agreement with representative Le Duc Tho of North Vietnam (who was heavily advised by Pham Van Dong). The agreement included the withdrawal of American troops from South Vietnam, as well as the release of the hundreds of POWs held by Vietnam and its allies, which came to be known as OPERATION HOMECOMING.[64] The last American troop left Vietnam on March 29, 1973.[65]

Although American troops had withdrawn from Vietnamese soil, their absence did not mean the end of violence for citizens in both North and South Vietnam.[66] The question still remained if Vietnam would become one unified country; and if so, who would be in charge of the unified country? Until 1975, North and South Vietnam remained in a civil war, the same situation they faced a decade before American involvement. On April 30, 1975, at 8:15 in the morning, the North Vietnamese stormed the city of Saigon from all sides, and America lost its first war. Vietnam reunited under one, communist government, partially led by Prime Minister, Pham Van Dong.[67]

[64] Olsen, *Dictionary of the Vietnam War,* 335.
[65] Burns and Ward, *The Vietnam War*, 693.
[66] Burns and Ward, *The Vietnam War*, 694.
[67] Burns and Ward, *The Vietnam War*, 735-736.

Chapter Two: Treatment of Prisoners of War Before 1969

"So there we were, dealing with an enemy who did not care about Geneva agreements on the treatment of war prisoners, an enemy who denied the International Red Cross entry into their country. After years passed, we realized that we were, and would probably always be, imprisoned in an environment of continuous physical and mental torture."[68] - From Colonel Larry Guarino, Prisoner of War, *A P.O.W.'s Story: 2801 Days in Hanoi*

In January of 1967, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) in Washington D.C. began generating reports on potential POW camps in North Vietnam, as 1967 saw the largest increase in the number of American servicemen captured by North Vietnamese forces.[69] According to a report published by the DIA, a Western visitor to Hanoi in late 1966 stated that, "electric fencing had been installed on top of the concrete wall," and that, "at each corner of the wall was a guard post manned by Regular Peoples' Army of Vietnam soldiers with machine guns."[70] Until OPERATION HOMECOMING, this report was the extent of the knowledge of the POW camp that came to be known as the Hanoi Hilton.

To gain a deeper understanding of the treatment of POWs during the Vietnam War, it is important to know the history of the camps in which POWs were housed, as well as their physical structure and layout. As discussed in chapter one, long before American involvement in Vietnam, France was included in Vietnamese affairs. Thus during the French occupation, they built the Hanoi Hilton to hold political prisoners.[71] The camp became a central holding site for POWs, eventually housing the majority of captured Americans in North Vietnam. Upon arrival at the Hanoi Hilton, prisoners were greeted with walls that were twenty feet high, four feet thick,

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[68] Larry Guarino, *A P.O.W.'s Story: 2801 Days in Hanoi,* (Ballantine Books, 1990), 165.
[69] Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, *US Prisoners of War Who Returned Alive from the Vietnam War* (report, Washington, DC: Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, July 20, 2017), https://www.dpaa.mil/portals/85/Documents/VietnamAccounting/pmsea_returnee.pdf.
[70] *Defense Intelligence Agency*, Library of Congress, item ID 110396, Vietnam-Era Prisoner-of-War/Missing in Action Collection, Federal Research Division https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service//frd/pwmia/387/110396.pdf.
[71] Mark Andrews, "Hoa Lo Prison," Britannica, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hoa-Lo-Prison.

and a ceiling, "studded by large pieces of glass and extended more than five feet by barbed and electrified strands of wire."[72]

Inside the walls of the Hanoi Hilton, the camp was divided into five different cellblocks: Little Vegas, New Guy Village, Heartbreak Hotel, Camp Unity, and Rawhide.[73] Captured prisoners were sent to one of these five cellblocks, where they spent most of their time. Upon initial capture and arrival at the Hanoi Hilton, most men were placed into the section named New Guy Village. POW Admiral Jermiah Denton recalls his cell here as having:

> Two solid concrete beds with metal-and-wood stocks at the foot of each. The one amenity was a small honey bucket (a pail that served as a toilet) in one corner. The concrete bunks were about 3 ½ feet high and 2 ½ feet apart. The cell was 9 feet by 8 feet. The door had a small peephole and was flanked by windows which had been covered over by a thin layer of concrete. At the other end of the cell was a barred window, from which I could see part of the huge wall which surrounded the prison.[74]

The cells in the Heartbreak Hotel and Little Vegas, were described by POW Porter Halyburton in a manner almost identical to how Denton described the New Guy Village, the only difference being the proximity to the other cells within the section. The section known as Rawhide is rarely mentioned by name in accounts written by POWs, but it is understood that this area of the camp was where the majority of tortures and interrogations took place. Camp Unity was used only after the death of Ho Chi Minh, and it provided prisoners with the opportunity to interact with one another, exercise, and roam relatively freely in a shared space. Before Ho's death, prisoners were not housed in Camp Unity, and access to amenities and communication were restricted, nor

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[72] Jeremiah Denton, *When Hell Was in Session,* (Reader's Digest, 1975), 20.
[73] See figure 1.2 and 1.3. These names of the prison camps as well as sections within the prison camps were made up by prisoners of war. All the camps had official names, which is how they were referred to in North Vietnam. Alcatraz was the Ministry of National Defense, the Zoo was Cu Loc, the Plantation was the Citadel, the Hanoi Hilton was Hoa Lo, Briarpatch was Xom Ap Lo, Camp Hope was Son Toy, and Camp Faith was Dan Hoi. There were other camp signs across North Vietnam, but there are the ones discussed throughout my entire thesis.
[74] Denton, *When Hell Was in Session,* 21.

were they allowed to communicate with one another. This will be explored in more depth later in the chapter.

POWs were often moved between camps, usually starting at the Hanoi Hilton, and then moving to the camp that was known as the Zoo, located about thirty miles southeast of the Hilton. Halyburton referred to this camp as the "Worst Place," a film production compound that was converted into a prison.[75] Similar to the Hanoi Hilton, the Zoo was sectioned off and given different names coined by the POWs. Although the structure of the building itself was quite different from that of Hanoi, the layout of the cells remained the same, minus a concrete slab to sleep on. Instead, POWs were given sleeping mats, and a rusty bucket as a toilet.

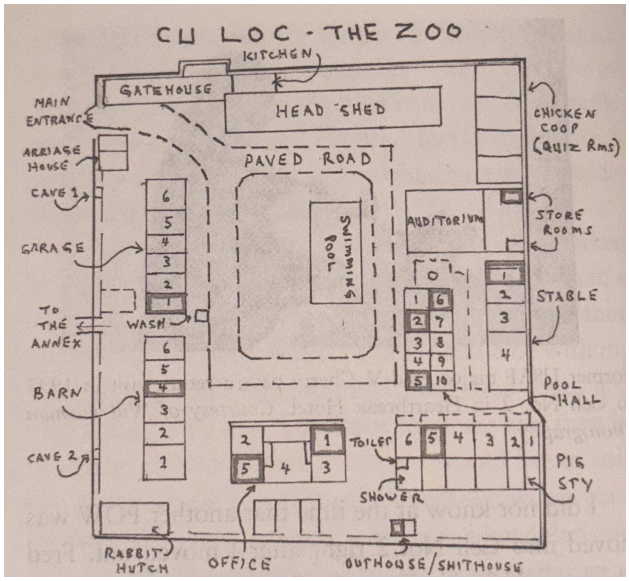


Figure 2.1: A floor plan of Cu Loc (the Zoo) prison.[76]

A camp known as Briarpatch was another compound POWs were relocated to, about thirty-five miles west of Hanoi near the mountains. This compound was rarely used, however, because it had no lights or running water. It did, however, hold about twenty of the first POWs captured.[77]

[75] Halyburton, *Reflections of Captivity,* 23-24.
[76] Halyburton, *Reflections of Captivity,* 24.
[77] Robinson Risner, *The Passing of the Night: My Seven Years as a Prisoner of the North Vietnamese* (Konecky & Konecky, 1999), 63.

The basic foundation and layout of the camps were not the only hurdles POWs had to overcome in terms of living standards. Not only did they have to sleep next to a bucket of their own feces and urine, but they were forced to share their cells with critters such as rats, mice, roaches, and mosquitos. According to the Geneva Conventions, POWs were to be quartered under favorable conditions, their daily food rations sufficient and good quality, proper clothing attire provided to them in accordance with the weather, and the rules of hygiene were to be closely maintained and in a constant state of cleanliness.[78] Prior to 1969, under Ho Chi Minh's power, these regulations were ignored.

Hygiene and Living Quality

Regardless of the campsite, the hygiene facilities remained consistent. As previously mentioned, rather than having access to a toilet, POWs were given a rusty bucket to do their business. Not only were the buckets rusty, but they had sharp edges, making going to the bathroom a potentially dangerous activity. A POW had to use the buckets carefully, "to avoid cutting his buttocks on the ragged mental rim."[79] POWs were forced to clean out the buckets themselves, while also sleeping and eating besides them. Cleaning the toilet, which also became referred to as the 'honey bucket' or as the '*bo*,' became a part of the POWs daily routine throughout the early years of imprisonment.[80] Prisoner of war Captain Jim Mulligan, captured March 20, 1966, recalls this process, explaining that a camp guard would escort the POWs from their cells, where they were led to a washroom with three holes dug into the ground. They would dump their honey buckets here, and then, "rinse them out with cold water from a badly leaking

[78] *Geneva Convention III*, chap. 3, arts. 25–27, 30, pg 93.
[79] Glenn Robins, *The Longest Rescue: The Life and Legacy of Vietnam POW William A. Robinson* (The University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 54. Glenn Robins worked closely with POW William Robinson to produce this book.
[80] James A. Mulligan, *The Hanoi Commitment* (RIF Marketing, 1981), 48.

tap."[81] The lack of sufficient cleaning supplies left the bucket, according to Mulligan, "still stanking to high heavens."[82]

Over time, pre-1969, the POWs mainly housed at the Zoo, were assigned to carry the other prisoner's *bos* to the dedicated area. Prisoners were required to take two buckets at a time until all were emptied, whereupon the task would subsequently be assigned to someone new. POW Colonel Larry Guarino, captured on June 4, 1965, recalls his turn taking out the honey buckets, explaining that, "the dirt path (they walked to get to the dumping sites) was slimy from the spillover of *bos,* and the cesspool was a square acre of floating feces."[83]

For those who were kept in the Briarpatch compound, cleaning out the honey buckets looked notably different, as there was no running water. POW Guarino recalls his time at Briarpatch, explaining that, "the *bos* were simply dumped into a corner of the yard, there wasn't even a hole in the ground," like there was at the Hanoi Hilton and at the Zoo.[84] Because there were no holes in the ground to cover the human waste, it would just continue to pile up and get to the point where people, guards or prisoners, could not walk around it.[85] Emptying the *bo* was a part of the allotted fifteen minutes of outside time, alongside refilling their water buckets and using the bath facilities.[86] Because POWs were not allowed to exercise they often walked laps in their tiny cells for hours on end. Similarly, because they were not allowed out of their cells, POWs would often pray in the confines of their own cell, rather than attending an in person religious service that was also promised through the Geneva conventions.

Although the POWs had access to a separate facility to bathe, unlike their toilet use, the conditions of the bathing areas were extremely poor. Because there was no running water at the

[81] Mulligan, *The Hanoi Commitment*, 49.
[82] Mulligan, *The Hanoi Commitment*, 49.
[83] Guarino, *A P.O.W.'s Story*, 67.
[84] Guarino, *A P.O.W.'s Story,* 52.
[85] Guarino, *A P.O.W.'s Story,* 52.
[86] Robins, *The Longest Rescue*, 86.

Briarpatch, POWs were given ten minutes to collect water from the well, and wash themselves and their clothing.[87] This ten-minute wash often had to last the prisoners over a month, as they were, "fortunate if they bathed once every six weeks at Briarpatch."[88]

At some of the other main camps, the facilities were relatively better, as they had running water and POWs were able to bathe at least once or twice a week. Some of the washrooms at the Hanoi Hilton which offered running water, however, did not have a traditional shower setup. There was a small room with a few sinks/small tubs, and dividers in between each area so the men could not communicate. In order to fill the sink/tub, men had to carry a large bucket with water and dump it into the tub. During the limited time the POWs were allowed in the washroom, they had to wash their bodies and clothing with cold water, while also fending off the mosquitos, pigs, and chickens, who roamed freely in the garbage within the washrooms.[89] The Zoo seemed to have the best facilities; rather than having to fill a tub with water, there was a, "dilapidated shower head," that worked well enough to clean off the prisoners.[90]

The items provided to the POWs for washing themselves and their clothing were inadequate in terms of quality and quantity. POWs were given a bar of lye soap and a small face towel that had to last them thirty to forty-five days, as they would not get new supplies were they to run out.[91] After using the lye soap for only a short period of time, Mulligan recalled that it was extremely important to wash all of the soap off oneself and from the clothing, as the "Vietnamese brown soup was irritating to the skin and caused severe rashes if not rinsed out completely."[92] To better understand the low quality of the soap, General Robinson Risner, captured on September 16, 1965, recalls the time he swallowed it in order to make himself lose his voice. The prison

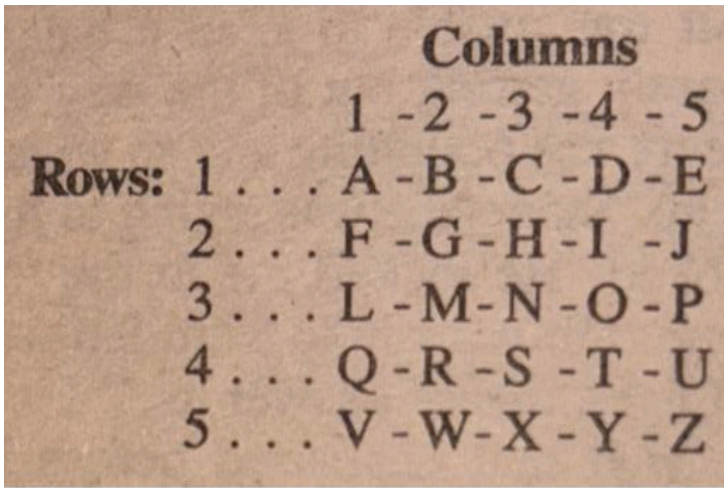
[87] Robins, *The Longest Rescue*, 64.
[88] Robins, *The Longest Rescue*, 64.
[89] John McGrath, *Prisoner of War: Six Years in Hanoi,* (Naval Institute Press, 2011), 16.
[90] Mulligan, *The Hanoi Commitment*, 63.
[91] McGrath, *Prisoner of War,* 56.
[92] Mulligan, *The Hanoi Commitment*, 74.

guards wanted to use Risner to create propaganda that would be shown to the United States. Risner understood that he could not say no without fear of additional torture, but he refused to participate in the North Vietnamese games. He decided that he would try to ruin his voice, rendering him ineffective to participate in the propaganda attempt. First, Risner began hitting his larynx, and pounding his throat as hard as he could to the point where he saw stars.[93] Risner choked himself and continued to chop at his throat until it became swollen, but even then, it did not affect his voice. Finally, Risner decided to use the soap to harm his voice, as his, "bar of soap had a tremendous amount of lye in it; so much that it would almost eat up the skin."[94] His action ultimately worked, temporarily making Risner unable to speak. This is just one example of the poor quality and potentially dangerous hygiene supplies that POWs were given during imprisonment.

According to the Geneva Conventions, POWs were entitled to engage in communication with each other, have access to the outdoors, exercise regularly, and practice their preferred religion.[95] All of these privileges were, not surprisingly, taken away by the camp guards. Communication, however, was vital among the POWs, especially in the early years, as it allowed them to keep track of who had been captured, the type of treatment others were receiving, and the overall well being of their fellow POWs. Denied the ability to communicate, the POWs incorporated a correspondence system that came to be known as the tap code into their everyday lives. Rather than using their voices to communicate, or even their hands since it was rare that they could see one another, they created a form of communication by tapping on walls in a particular pattern. POW Denton claimed that, "the tap code became the staple form of

[93] Risner, *The Passing of the Night,* 119.
[94] Risner, *The Passing of the Night,* 119.
[95] *Geneva Convention III,* Article 35 and 38.

communication because it was simple and could be sent in a wider variety of situations than the Morse code."[96]



		Columns				
		1	2	3	4	5
Rows:	1	A	B	C	D	E
	2	F	G	H	I	J
	3	L	M	N	O	P
	4	Q	R	S	T	U
	5	V	W	X	Y	Z

Figure 2.2: This is the Tap Code POWs would use to communicate with one another. POW Guarino explains how this was used: "The first tap denoted the row, the second tap, the column. Each letter needed two sets of taps. For example letter *A:* 1 tap (first row), slight pause, 1 tap (first letter in row).[97] The letter 'K' was excluded and often interchangeable with 'C', so that the chart could be in a 5x5 format.

Colonel Carlye 'Smitty' Harris, a retired soldier and former POW captured on April 4, 1965, wrote a book explaining the intricacy of the tap code, describing how the code was created, how others learned it, and how they taught other POWs. During his time in an Escape and Evasion school, Harris learned the tap code, which he described as "making a difference in my life and in the lives of more than 350 other POWs at the Hanoi Hilton."[98] His instructor, Sergeant Claude Watkins, briefly mentioned that POWs in Germany would use a tap code by tapping on surrounding objects, sending messages to other prisoners.[99] Although this was not significant to the class, Harris proved curious, thinking the tap code was a form of morse code, wondering how this worked with dashes. Watkins then explained to him that it was not a form of

[96] Denton, *When Hell Was in Session,* Preface.
[97] Guarino, *A P.O.W.'s Story,* 40.
[98] Carlyle 'Smitty' Harris, *Tap Code: The Epic Survival Tale of a Vietnam POW and the Secret Code that Changed Everything,* (Zondervan Books, 2019), 74.
[99] Tap code existed prior to the war, but to my knowledge, it was not used by American troops until Vietnam.

morse code, but rather it was a new form of communication. Watkins then proceeded to teach it to Harris.

Harris learned the tap code out of curiosity, and it proved to be life changing for all POWs in North Vietnam. After being in solitary confinement, Harris, along with three other POWs were put together in a Heartbreak Hotel cell. They were lucky to have been able to sneak in the occasional whispers between one another, but feared they would be discovered, so Harris proposed teaching tap code to his fellow cellmates. To spread word to other POWs, Harris and his cellmates left notes in the bathroom facilities on how to use tap code. Over time, the tap code grew between cellmates and across camps, providing the POWs with a discreet and effective way to communicate with one another without getting caught.

Even in instances where POWs did not have roommates during their captivity or were placed into solitary confinement, they were never alone. In addition to the constant company of guards monitoring their every move, they were often kept company by cockroaches, mice, rats, lizards, mosquitos, and even scorpions. Upon arrival to any of the camps, the POWs were given mosquito nets to protect them at night. These nets, however, did nothing to protect them from the animals they might have encountered. Scorpions often lived in the washrooms and would pay occasional visits to the cells; geckos came to feed on the flies, mice, and rats, and ants would often try and share the food the POWs received.[100] While the critters were already present in the buildings before the POWs, the constant flow of food significantly increased their presence.

[100] Guarino, *A P.O.W.'s Story,* 43 and 45.

Food Quality

Upon imprisonment, regardless of the camp, prisoners were given the same meal: "stale bread, meat with hair on it, and some watery pumpkin, cabbage or swamp green soup."[101] Sometimes, if they were lucky, they would receive a warm cup of tea upon capture. Up until 1969, these items along with two quarts of water a day became breakfast and dinner, but not lunch, as the POWs were only given two meals a day if they were on their best behavior. On occasion, there would be food shortages, resulting in a slight shift in the provided meals. Mulligan remembers an instance in which the North Vietnamese were low on bread, so in place of the bread, the prisoners were given rice, which ultimately infested Mulligan, and others, with rice worms.[102] It was more common than not for POWs to suffer from diarrhea and dysentery based on the food provided. POWs suffering from diarrhea and dysentery made the use of the honey buckets even more hazardous, forcing them to exist in a cell surrounded by their own waste.

If POWs were perceived as behaving poorly, the guards would often leave the food sitting in front of their cells, allowing animals to take their share before giving what was left to the prisoners. Even when the guards deemed the prisoners to be on good behavior, the animals were brazen enough to attempt to steal it from them while they were eating. Considering they were starving, it did not make a difference to the POWs. Risner recalls that, "one day, a rat jumped up and grabbed a piece of bread lying on my bunk. I grabbed the bread and chased away the rat. He was probably covered with every disease germ imaginable…but I was so hungry that it just didn't make a difference."[103] Over time, the "rats became as big as alley cats, and became

[101] Ray Vohden, *A Story of the Fifth Longest Held POW in U.S. History: First POW Released At Homecoming* (Authorhouse, 2009), 34.
[102] Mulligan, *The Hanoi Commitment*, 82.
[103] Risner, *The Passing of the Night,* 99.

very bold and brazen as they ran about the rooms looking for food."[104] It would sometimes even get to the point that the rats would become aggressive, and nibble on the feet of POWs thinking their toes were food.[105]

At the Hanoi Hilton, some POWs were given the privilege of working in the kitchen and cleaning dirty dishes from the day. Although this was a way for prisoners to get out of their cells, guards carefully watched them as they washed the dishes to make sure the POWs weren't sneaking any extra scraps that might have been left on the plates. This, however, did not stop them. During one of Risner's dish washing shifts, when he saw the guard look away, he would "eat every scrap available, including that which had been partially eaten."[106] If Risner had been caught eating the food, the guard would force him to throw it onto the ground, something that had occurred before. The same place in which the guards relieved themselves, and where the honey buckets were emptied is where the food was thrown. Even then, Risner would pick the food up off the floor, claiming that, "I was so starved that anything with any substance or bulk was a blessing."[107] Stealing food from the actual kitchen was also common, as POWs would try to sneak meat or other goods out of the kitchen under their shirts. This, however, was not without consequences. When POWs were caught disobeying the rules, it would often lead to torture, including starvation, a topic that will be discussed later in this chapter.

Medical Treatment

On May 6, 1967, pilot Robert Wideman was rushed into a mission in Vietnam with the goal to roll in on a possible Viet Cong target from the air. He recalled hearing a metallic click, after which the plane's steer became stuck, pulling it to the left, and causing it to spin

[104] McGrath, *Prisoner of War,* 96.
[105] McGrath, *Prisoner of War,* 96.
[106] Risner, *The Passing of the Night,* 101.
[107] Risner, *The Passing of the Night,* 101.

continuously in a counterclockwise motion.[108] Wideman was unable to steady the place, ultimately forcing him to eject. While plummeting toward the ground, Wideman recalled seeing stars, and eventually landed straight on his back. Upon impact, Wideman was one of the lucky few who suffered only minor injuries, including that the middle finger on his right hand getting stuck in the 'flipping someone off' position to this day. Although he was not severely injured, he did not have an opportunity to run, as approximately 200 Vietnamese surrounded him and captured him, thus marking the beginning of his time as a POW. Wideman's hands were tied behind his back, and upon arrival at the local village near where he had crashed, he was handed a cigarette and some tea, then paraded through the entirety of the village.[109] During his walk, the villagers attempted to beat him, and hit him with random items, while the guards held rifles to his head so he could not run.

After his forced march through the village, Wideman was given dinner while he waited for transportation to the Hanoi Hilton. The trip from the local village to the Hanoi Hilton began with Wideman's hands once again being tied behind his back. The drive was slow and difficult because the vehicle traveled at what Wideman estimated to be five miles per hour, and if there was any sign of American planes overhead, the vehicle would halt completely, turn off all the lights, and wait at least twenty minutes before continuing so as to not be caught.[110] Before reaching the Hanoi Hilton, Wideman was taken to another village, where he was interrogated about his military actions as well as his home life in the U.S. Wideman eventually gave them the answers they sought, whereupon they began his official transport to the Hanoi Hilton, which ultimately took four days.[111] At the Hanoi Hilton, hands still restrained behind his back,

[108] Robert Wideman, "Interview with Robert Wideman," interview by Courtney Cohen, Fort Collins, CO November 21, 2025, 00:03:20.
[109] Wideman, 00:06:06.
[110] Wideman, 00:10:47.
[111] Wideman, 00:18:21.

Wideman was blindfolded, and thrown into a dungeon that he described as, “six by four, goes up about twenty feet, it had whitewashed walls that hadn’t been washed in twenty years. Dirty, you know, I could hear the blood curdling scream in the background.”[112] After approximately a week of confinement, Wideman was pulled for interrogation, and after hearing echoing screams in the hallways, he was given a grim preview of the years to come. Although Wideman’s injury was not severe, and he did not require the medical treatments guaranteed to him by the Geneva Conventions, a majority of his fellow POWs were not nearly as fortunate.

When examining the medical guidelines of the treatment of POWs it is essential to examine the ways in which North Vietnam violated them. Gaining insight to the medical knowledge of the Vietnamese at this time is vital to understanding the treatment of POWs, as it reveals the level of medical training they had, and how this shaped the POWs' care.

According to the Geneva Conventions, POWs were intended to be, “admitted to any military or civilian medical unit,” if needed, upon capture and during their time in captivity.[113] However, many POWs were stripped of that right. Most of the American soldiers who were captured were air pilots. Because aviators would often fly over enemy territory, and in the case that they were shot down, they landed on enemy soil. Rather than going down with the plane, many soldiers implemented the ejection protocols they learned during training. Ejecting from a fast moving plane, however, carried the risk of severe injury and even death, as they plummeted from the sky. More often than not, soon-to-be POWs experienced devastating injuries upon not only landing in enemy lines, but during the ejection process itself.

[112] Wideman, 00:18:41.
[113] *Geneva Convention III,* Article 30.

Medical Training in the Twentieth Century World

Accepted medical procedures according to western medicine practices were hard to come by in North Vietnam. The majority of doctors and dentists who treated the POWs were not properly trained. The hospitals were usually dark, and the rooms and equipment were left behind from the French Indochina war, rendering the rooms unsterile. The POWs who returned home, oftentimes required corrective operations, and before being reunited with their families, had to go through thorough medical examinations.[114]

Before the French colonized Vietnam, medical practices and training followed a structure known as eastern medicine. This practice originated in China and was based on a system dedicated to restoring the balance of the body's energies through methods such as acupuncture, herbal remedies, and a change in diet.[115] After the French colonized Vietnam, however, their medical practices began to shift, and the Vietnamese people began to explore and integrate westernized medical methods. Historian Laurence Monnais argued that the impact of colonialism on framing the medical system in Vietnam played a crucial role in the development of an expanding and integrative health system, forever changing the way the Vietnamese practiced medicine.[116]

Over the course of the French occupation, the French began to denounce traditional eastern medicine, as it did not include major western medical advancements such as surgical procedures and forms of anesthesia, two practices that would prove to be detrimental to the injured prisoners of war. Without these advanced practices, the French had even gone so far as to

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[114] Mulligan, *The Hanoi Commitment*, 284-285.
[115] "Chinese Medicine," John Hopkins Medicine, 2025, https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/chinese-medicine.
[116] Laurence Monnais, "The Reinvention of an Appropriate Tradition or the Colonial Birth of Vietnamese Medicine," *Therapeutic Properties: Global Medical Cultures, Knowledge, and Law* 36, no. 1 (2021): 113–31, https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/713423, 115.

say that Vietnamese patients were in danger when seeing their Vietnamese practitioners.[117] There were no distinguished specialties between doctors, implying that Vietnamese medical professionals could perform multiple medical procedures including everything from a toothache to general surgery, as they were not trained in one specific field. Although not explicitly stated within the autobiographies of the POWs, it is highly likely that the same group of doctors were expected to perform all operations, no matter how different they were.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, the French began implementing new medical institutions across Vietnam in hopes of keeping their labor force healthy. Although the reasoning for the new medical care was not morally correct, it allowed the population to get mass vaccinations, to learn about the benefits of biomedicine, and to train new doctors in the newly opened Hanoi Medical School.[118] The curriculum of the Hanoi Medical School through the latter half of the twentieth century was based on what is known as the Flexner Model. Training through this model was science-and-hospital based theories and practices, was teacher-centered, and did not integrate basic and clinical science.[119] Due to the structure of this curriculum, new doctors lacked strong patient communication skills, as well as thorough understanding of medical ethics.[120]

Understanding the medical history of Vietnam provides two foundational ideas: first, when Americans arrived in Vietnam and POWs were captured, medical knowledge and training in Vietnam were relatively new and still developing. Many of the physicians responsible for treating the POWs had minimal medication education, and though it may sound harsh, it is hard to tell whether or not they were doing everything they could based on their medical training.

[117] Monnais, "The Reinvention of an Appropriate Tradition," 117.
[118] Monnais, "The Reinvention of an Appropriate Tradition," 118-119.
[119] Tuan D. Tran et al., "Transforming Medical Education to Strengthen the Health Professional Training in Viet Nam: A Case Study," *THE LANCET Regional Health* 27 (October 2022): 1–11, https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanwpc/article/PIIS2666-6065(22)00158-4/fulltext, 1.
[120] Tran, "Transforming Medical Education," 1.

Second, a lot of the ideologies taught at the universities were framed by the thought processes of Ho Chi Minh. Since Ho regarded American prisoners as war criminals, the medical staff may have been wary of establishing relationships or providing adequate treatment to the POWs.

In Vietnam, western medicine was relatively new, but in the United States, the medical knowledge was way ahead of that of Vietnam. Therefore, it is important to understand the medical training that American soldiers received before entering the war, knowing there would be battlefield wounds that require immediate attention. To gain a better understanding of what medical training soldiers received before going to Vietnam, I sat with veteran Officer Dean Hittle who fought in the Vietnam War (not a prisoner of war), to discuss the basic training process. I was surprised to hear that during basic training, typically lasting six months, soldiers received no medical training, even on things that would commonly arise in a war zone, such as applying bandages to a wound.[121] Instead of learning these medical practices during basic training, Hittle explained that after basic training, most, if not all soldiers would go to further training, referred to as Advanced Individual Training (AIT). It was here in AIT where soldiers learned first-aid, as well as other life-saving skills that would apply specifically to the battlefield. Although not a part of the Air Force, Hittle understood the basic process of different types of AIT, explaining that, "if you are in the air force and you pass all the tests, and you want to be a pilot as opposed to just on the ground, you are trained in that area."[122] AIT for air pilots is where most of them received their first-aid training. Beyond basic first-aid training, however, it was primarily combat medics who were taught to perform more intense procedures, such as amputations or other types of surgeries.

[121] Dean Hittle, "Interview with Dean Hittle," interview by Courtney Cohen, Fort Collins, CO, December 8, 2025, 00:03:24.
[122] Hittle, 00:07:07.

The stories from the prisoners of war, as seen previously, reveal that many of the prisoners had to rely on each other for medical assistance, rather than rely on the North Vietnamese. That is to say, that the first-aid training American pilots received far exceeded the so-called medical training of the North Vietnamese doctors, if for no other reason than western technology surpassed that of the Vietnamese. Today, it may seem obvious that air bubbles in IV tubes can cause air embolisms in the heart, or that packing raw meat into an open, infected wound would only worsen the infection and potentially lead to gangrene. The experiences of American POWs, however, suggests that basic medical knowledge and standards of care differed greatly between the POWs, Ho Chi Minh, and the Vietnamese responsible for their treatment.

Wound & External Care

One noteworthy example of medical mistreatment is the case of POW Major Fred Cherry, captured on October 22, 1965. Although Cherry never wrote an autobiography, his medical journey was recounted by his Hanoi Hilton cellmate, Lieutenant Porter Halyburton, who witnessed Cherry's experience firsthand. After his capture, Cherry was severely injured, with the most serious wounds being to his shoulder and arm, "as his arm had been almost ripped off when he blew away the canopy of his F-105 and it was swept into the six-hundred-mile-an-hour slipstream."[123] In addition to his near-amputation, Cherry suffered from a broken foot, and cuts across his face and body.[124] Rather than being treated for his injuries, Cherry was dropped into Halyburton's cell with just a simple sling to support his injured arm, and the two were left to tend to their wounds in a cell that offered only a bricked window, a mosquito net, and three cigarettes a day.[125]

[123] Halyburton, *Reflections of Captivity,* 35.
[124] Halyburton, *Reflections of Captivity,* 35.
[125] Halyburton, *Reflections of Captivity,* 35-36.

Over time, and without proper treatment, Cherry's injuries worsened. After multiple pleas with the camp guards, including one man who came to be known to the POWs as "The Rabbit," the guards eventually had a conversation addressing the decline of Cherry's health due to his injuries.[126] Following the discussion, the Rabbit, alongside doctors, returned days later and examined Cherry's shoulder, indicating surgery was necessary.[127] While this decision could be interpreted as compliance to the Geneva Conventions, many POWs remained skeptical about the quality of the surgery they would receive. Halyburton stated, "I don't think they know what they are doing, and if they cut on you, you're bound to get infected. Just bear with it till we get home to get it fixed the right way," making the assumption that the war would be over soon.[128] Regardless, Cherry had no real ability to refuse the surgery, as the guards held complete control over the prisoners and their decisions.

Cherry was forcibly removed from his cell for the operation on his shoulder, and was returned to his cell in a, "body cast from his waist to his neck, with his left arm at a 90-degree angle to his body and bent 90 degrees at the elbow."[129] The constriction of the body cast across his chest left him semi-conscious and breathing shallowly upon his return. Weeks after the surgery, Cherry showed no signs of improvement and requested to see another doctor. The pain he experienced caused hallucinations, and his wounds were infected. The Geneva Conventions state that, "prisoners of war shall have the attention of medical Power in which they can depend on," but it took multiple pleas for Halyburton to get the attention of the Vietnamese guards. He

[126] This North Vietnamese guard was named "The Rabbit" by American prisoners of war because of his distinctive feature of his "front buck teeth."; "Life as a Vietnam War POW," *Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training (ADST)*, June 12, 2020, https://adst.org/2020/06/life-as-a-vietnam-war-pow/
[127] Halyburton, *Reflections of Captivity,* 37.
[128] Halyburton, *Reflections of Captivity,* 37.
[129] Halyburton, *Reflections of Captivity,* 37-38.

communicated to them that if they did not remove the cast on Cherry's upper-body or provide him antibiotics for the infection, he would surely die.[130]

Cherry was, once again, forcefully removed from his cell, and this time he returned without the body cast. While the absence of the body cast eased his breathing, Cherry had been retrained to a stretcher with rope for so-called "safety," which ultimately restricted his airflow yet again. The primary goal for Cherry's treatment should have been for his shoulder and arm, and he now had to contend with a gaping hole surrounded by, "nine open wounds on his emaciated body and the gaping hole which exposed his tailbone," as a result of the numerous procedures.[131] The "medical treatment" included being washed with gasoline to remove pus and dead skin, surgically placing an IV into his ankle that introduced air bubbles into his bloodstream, and a cast so tight around his wounds that it cut off the circulation to his arm and prevented proper healing.[132] Arguably, the most "proper" medical care that Cherry received came from Halyburton, who took out tubes riddled with air bubbles, correctly applied his bandages, and lifted his chest cast secretly when the guards were not watching so Cherry could breathe. Eventually, Cherry was taken to a real hospital, but the "prison guards kidnapped him from the hospital and returned him to the cell."[133] This is just one of the many ways in which Cherry was denied proper medical treatment in accordance with the Geneva Conventions, and Cherry was far from the only POW to experience medical neglect.

Similar to Cherry, Colonel Sam Johnson suffered severe medical complications in his arm after ejecting from his aircraft during an attack by the North Vietnamese. After releasing napalm, Johnson's plane malfunctioned, and he fell straight into enemy territory. As Johnson grew closer

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[130] *Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War*, art. 30., and Halyburton, *Reflections of Captivity,* 39.
[131] Halyburton, *Reflections of Captivity,* 40.
[132] Halyburton, *Reflections of Captivity,* 40-41.
[133] Halyburton, *Reflections of Captivity,* 42.

to the ground, his arm twisted, as if it were going to break completely off his body. Johnson recalls this moment as watching, "my right arm windmill for a second or two," before he realized, "something's wrong with the left one too," as his shoulder snapped loudly.[134] Despite his obvious injuries, Johnson's North Vietnamese captors transported him through multiple villages without treatment. It was not until the last village before his final destination at the Hanoi Hilton, where Johnson interacted with medical professionals. His interaction, however, came with specific conditions.

Before receiving treatment, Johnson was told he must write a letter to the United States explaining how well he was being treated by the North Vietnamese. Even with both arms out of commission, he managed to put enough words together to slyly indicate that he was not, in fact, receiving appropriate treatment. His captors then transported him to a different house in the village, which was said to be the doctor's. When the doctor entered the room, he "pulled out a long hypodermic needle that looked as if it belonged in a veterinarian's bag," which was filled with some sort of clear liquid.[135] With no knowledge and no explanation of what this mystery liquid was, the doctor injected it into Johnson's shoulder, temporarily paralyzing his arm. Even though Johnson had received a paralytic medication that was supposed to numb the pain in his arm, he was still conscious throughout the entire procedure. Johnson observed the doctors pressing against the muscle and bone in his arm, which convinced him that the doctor had no idea what he was doing.[136] After treating the right arm, Johnson's left arm still required attention, which consisted of manipulating it until the doctors decided it was properly in place. Johnson described the medical care he received at numerous villages as poor, but once he arrived at the

[134] Sam Johnson and Jan Winebrenner, *Captive Warriors: A Vietnam POWs Story,* (Texas A&M University, 1992), 31-32.
[135] Johnson, *Captive Warriors,* 48.
[136] Johnson, *Captive Warriors,* 48.

Hanoi Hilton, he found himself wishing for the type of treatment he had previously received at the villages.[137] While Cherry received some degree of medical intervention without condition, Johnson's injuries were used to extort information about the American military, a topic that will be discussed later in the chapter.

Another example of medical mistreatment is General Robinson Risner, who experienced severe injury upon ejection from his plane, stating that his "right leg was almost incapacitated," and he also severely pulled the ligaments in his knee.[138] Every step sent shooting pain up his leg, and his kneecap was swollen and discolored."[139] Unbeknownst to Risner upon arrival at the Hanoi Hilton, his rights, protected under the Geneva Conventions, would also not be granted. One of his first thoughts was, "I am a prisoner of war. According to the Geneva Conventions, I am entitled to certain privileges. I'll get to write letters and receive Red Cross packages."[140] Risner was shocked to discover that not only would he not receive Red Cross packages, but he would be forced to let his leg heal without the critical medical attention it required.

Admiral Jeremiah A. Denton, who was in the cell next to Halyburton and Cherry, also faced extreme injuries and lack of medical intervention upon his capture. Similar to other POWs, Denton was wounded when his aircraft crashed. While attempting to land the plane safely, his aircraft was hit, causing it to shift positions. In an attempt to stop the plane from shifting, Denton slammed his foot on the rudder, snapping a tendon in his thigh, which in turn recoiled up into his abdomen, rendering his leg useless.[141] Due to the extent of this injury and the inability to use his leg, escape was deemed impossible. Even if he'd had the ability to move, Denton was quickly surrounded by thirty Vietnamese soldiers. Seeing his injured leg, his captors placed him on a

[137] Johnson, *Captive Warriors,* 71.
[138] Risner, *The Passing of the Night,* 10.
[139] Risner, *The Passing of the Night,* 14.
[140] Risner, *The Passing of the Night,* 20.
[141] Denton, *When Hell Was in Session,* 4.

plank for transport, and the excruciating pain caused him to pass out, while simultaneously marking the start of his time as a POW.

Before being moved to the Hanoi Hilton, Denton was taken to a local village near his capture site. Arguably, Denton received more medical attention here than he did during his time in Hanoi, as he was given medicine to help him regain feeling in his leg, a crutch to help him walk, and water to fuel him. Upon arrival at the Hanoi Hilton, Denton was assigned a cell, and after a few fleeting moments of sleep, a prison guard woke him up for interrogation. Denton reiterated that with his snapped tendon, he could not walk, but rather than offering medical assistance, they forced him to crawl to the interrogation room.[142] Although there were Vietnamese doctors available to provide help to some POWs, Denton never saw one. Rather, a Vietnamese nurse attended to his medical needs within his secluded cell. Denton referred to this nurse as, "Nursie," and her medical examinations mostly consisted of changing bandages that had previously been poorly applied.[143]

Denton remained concerned for his own well-being, but he recognized fellow POWs in dire need of medical attention. Captain Ray Vohden, for example, had a horribly injured leg after he was shot down, and Denton described the medical treatment for his leg as, "the Vietnamese doctors aggravated [it] with a series of bungling operations."[144] Following his ejection from the plane and collision with the ground, Vohden noticed that the flight boot on his right foot had flopped over a ninety degree angle, and the, "jagged ends of two pinkish white bones," were sticking out of his flight suit.[145] Because of the visible gruesomeness of his injury, Vohden's captors did provide him with medical treatment before transporting him to the Hanoi Hilton.

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[142] Denton, *When Hell Was in Session,* 21.
[143] Denton, *When Hell Was in Session,* 26.
[144] Denton, *When Hell Was in Session,* 28.
[145] Vohden, *A Story of the Fifth Longest Held POW*, 10-11.

Vohden's first operation was performed in a small village, where a man in street clothes stated he'd be performing the operation. Using sodium pentathol, a light anesthetic, the doctors knocked Vohden out for the procedure, and by the time he woke up, his leg was encased with a plaster cast ranging from his upper thigh to the sole of his foot.[146] Following the operation, Vohden was transported to a traditional hospital, where he was given X-rays on his leg. From this point forward, his medical treatment rapidly declined. Still in the hospital in which Vohden received the X-ray, the doctors informed him that both bones were broken, and the cast would have to come off in order for them to fix it.[147] The removal of the cast proved detrimental to the healing of Vohden's leg. Rather than being stabilized in a cast to prevent further injury, his leg was confined to a box held together with only a bandage which increased the movement of the broken bones.

According to one of Vohden's cellmates, Colonel James Q. Collins, the medical staff packed horse meat into Vohden's wounds to assist with the infection, which ultimately caused the infection to worsen.[148] Following his first month of imprisonment, Vohden knew his physical health was deteriorating. The shattered bones he'd seen on the day of his initial crash still floated along the surface of the bandage, rubbing together with any slight movement, the bandage grew darker with blood and dirt, as no one came by to change it.[149] Every time the bones rubbed against one another, Vohden described the pain as, "like the frayed ends of bare electrical wires suddenly touching."[150] With the increasing stench wafting from Vohden's infection, Vietnamese guards and doctors began to pay more attention to Vohden's medical condition. In this case,

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[146] Vohden, *A Story of the Fifth Longest Held POW*, 21.
[147] Vohden, *A Story of the Fifth Longest Held POW*, 29.
[148] James Quincy Collins, "Interview with James Quincy Collins," OH0663, January 27, 2009, Col. James Quincy Collins Jr. Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=OH0663, 67.
[149] Vohden, *A Story of the Fifth Longest Held POW*, 41.
[150] Vohden, *A Story of the Fifth Longest Held POW*, 41.

however, more medical attention did not equal a better medical outcome. The bones were not mending to the tibia which is typically expected after this type of procedure, and a large portion of the bone had become infected and began to rot due to the initial inadequate treatment he received. Because of the way this rot and infection progressed, Vohden ended up having a piece of his shin removed.[151] After all of these medical procedures, Vohden stated that he no longer wished to be seen for any future medical care.

The story of POW Lieutenant John McGrath is abnormal compared to those previously discussed. Like the other POWs, McGrath's plane was shot down, and in order to save his life he pulled the ejection handle, but he landed in a village where he was jumped by Vietnamese farmers and local militia, not the VC. McGrath suffered from a fractured left arm, two fractured vertebrae, and a fractured left knee.[152] In addition to these injuries, however, the Vietnamese who captured him purposefully hyper extended his left knee six times, and dislocated his right shoulder and right elbow.[153] While it was not uncommon for captors to beat up Americans to some degree, the extent of this assault was rare. Before being transported to the Hanoi Hilton, McGrath was, "denied any medical treatment because I would not give any information other than my name, rank, serial number, and date of birth," which was the only information required of POWs through the Geneva Conventions.[154]

[151] Vohden, *A Story of the Fifth Longest Held POW*, 46 and 51.
[152] McGrath, *Prisoner of War,* 6.
[153] McGrath, *Prisoner of War,* 1 and 6.
[154] *Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War,* art. 30., p. 93.

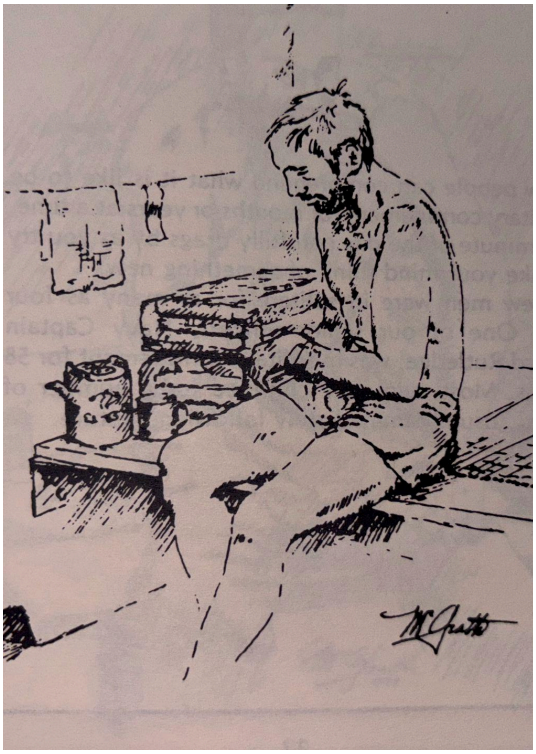

Figure 2.3: In his autobiography *Prisoner of War: Six Years in Hanoi,* McGrath included numerous drawings depicting the time he spent as a POW. This photograph shows the invention he created in order to keep his arm sturdy.[155]

McGrath's denial of medical care resulted in him experiencing extreme, untreated pain for months on end. In an attempt to make his pain somewhat manageable, he resorted to his own limited medical knowledge. To ease the pain on his left wrist, for example, McGrath used a strip of cloth to tie his wrist to a nail in the wall, to prevent mobility of his arm.[156] Despite devising a method to isolate his injured arm, he was still denied the protections promised in the Geneva Conventions. During the early years of his capture, McGrath begged his captors to set his broken arm and relocate his dislocated shoulder, but his pleas were ignored. Because of the pain, McGrath attempted to throw himself against a wall to relocate his shoulder, an effort that ultimately failed.[157]

[155] McGrath, *Prisoner of War,* 11.
[156] McGrath, *Prisoner of War,* 10.
[157] McGrath, *Prisoner of War,* 20.

On September 20, 1965, POW William A. Robinson marked the first of what would be 13,000 days in captivity. Setting out that day, Robinson and his crew became part of an armed reconnaissance mission; a mission requiring soldiers to be ready at a moment's notice in case of a discovery of enemy movement. During this mission, the group of airmen came under enemy fire, and as the fire intensified, their helicopter was riddled with bullet holes. As the mission had them relatively close to the ground, Robinson aimed the aircraft toward the jungle in an attempt to pad the landing, rather than hit solid ground. Based on the mechanisms of the crash combined with the knowledge of modern day mechanics, had Robison not aimed for the jungle, the chance of survival upon hitting the ground would have been slim.[158]

After the initial impact, all five of the men exited the helicopter. Two wasted no time running; whereas the other three, including Robinson, searched for a place to hide until nightfall to avoid detection by the enemy. This worked for a brief time, but Robinson and his two crew members were eventually separated and captured. Amid the chaos and capture, Robinson's adrenaline was so high that he did not realize he had, "suffered two hairline fractures in his back and had 'crushed both knees.'"[159] With the information provided in his autobiography, it seems that Robinson was never treated for these injuries, rather, he was forced to let his body heal as naturally as possible over his seven-year period of captivity.

Internal Wound Care

Visible physical wounds were not the only medical issues requiring attention. Colonel James Q. Collins, previously mentioned as one of Vohden's roommates, had a severe case of pneumonia during imprisonment. For treatment, Collins received an, "a big, brown looking serum in a big vial,", which caused him such unbearable pain that he cried every time. was so

[158] Robins, *The Longest Rescue*, 37.
[159] Robins, *The Longest Rescue*, 38.

painful it made Collins cry every time.[160] Throughout the course of the treatment for pneumonia, doctors injected the tick serum into the same spot on Collins' arm until it eventually became dramatically swollen and infected. Because of the obvious swelling in his shoulder, camp guards took Collins to the hospital. After learning he would be undergoing an operation, Collins pleaded for pain medication before they began, but doctors simply wiped his arm off with some cotton and ether. After, they cut open Collins' shoulder, resulting in pus from the arm flying all over the walls and the doctors. Disgusted, the doctors sent Collins back to camp with the wound completely exposed, so that it could continue to drain.[161]

Another example of internal injuries were the severe pains that Risner experienced. In addition to arm and shoulder injuries, he began to experience severe pains in his back, stomach, and groin, which progressively worsened with time. One night in particular, Risner attempted to sleep through the pain, but instead, he woke up in unbearable pain, and asked his cell mate for assistance. Due to the consistent pleas from Risner, the guards were persuaded to take him to the hospital, thinking as the pain might be caused by underlying kidney stones. Rather than ethically examining Risner, the Vietnamese doctor assigned during the transport "raised his fist and hit me with a sharp blow right over the kidney," causing Risner to pass out from the pain.[162] Later, still in transport, Risner woke himself up after choking on his own spit. Upon arrival at the hospital, nobody was willing to assist Risner from the truck into the hospital; so in excruciating pain, he crawled on his hands and knees to the doors of the medical facility.

Once Risner was inside, the doctors only attempt to diagnose him was a firm smack on the back, as there was a language barrier. Based on this inadequate examination, doctors inserted a long needle into his kidney though his back, and injected various medicines directly into his

[160] Collins, Interview, 101.
[161] Collins, Interview, 101.
[162] Risner, *The Passing of the Night,* 158.

kidney. All of this was done without pain management, and afterward, Risner was forced to crawl back to the truck, unassisted, for transportation back to the Hanoi Hilton. Inside the prison walls, Risner remained in agonizing pain for multiple days, and endured overheating, sweating, and attempting to pass what did turn out to be a kidney stone. The stones reappeared in June, and because the camp guards knew what it was, they opted not to take him to the hospital.[163] The resulting treatment of his second bout with kidney stones was to once again suffer in the confines of his cell.

Torture in the Prison Camps

The combination of poor food and medical treatment acted as its own form of torture, but it was far from the worst torture POWs received. POWs were starved, beaten, denied proper medical care, exercise, etc., all of which lowered their quality of life, and in addition to these abuses, POWs were subjected to intense emotional and physical torture, which will be the focus of this section. Before 1969, POWs were often tortured for propaganda purposes, as well as information pertaining to the aircraft the POWs were flying when they were captured.[164]

Upon arrival to the Hanoi Hilton, POWs were not subjected to torture as a first course of action. Rather, the prison guards would often sit them down and interrogate them with questions such as, "How do you navigate a target?" They were also known to ask them to write a biography detailing their lives before capture, as well as inquire about "proper" treatment they were receiving from the guards.[165] For example, upon capture, POW Harris was asked, "what type of aircraft were you flying, from where did you take off, and what was your target?"[166] If the POWs were not asked about their aircraft, they were asked to, "show appreciation to the

[163] Risner, *The Passing of the Night,* 159.
[164] Denton, *When Hell Was in Session,* 22; Guarino, *A P.O.W.'s Story,* 26.
[165] Denton, *When Hell Was in Session,* 49; Guarino, *A P.O.W.'s Story,* 26.
[166] Harris, *Tap Code,* 27.

government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam by writing a letter to Ho Chi Minh thanking him for his leniency and telling him you are sorry for your acts against the DRV."[167] If the POWs refused, the guards would issue threats of torture against them. One guard, who the POWs called, "the Eagle," in honor of his pseudocombat status, told POW Jeremiah Denton, "if you continue to refuse to cooperate in a reasonable way by answering our questions, we cannot guarantee your safety. If you continue to insult us we will have to turn you over to the civilian authorities, who will force you to talk…they will apply severe punishment, and if that punishment results in losing a limb, they will dispose of you."[168] In nearly every account of life as a POW in North Vietnam, this same threat was made to all captured Americans.

Within the Code of Conduct, a key set of rules used by all soldiers in the Vietnam War, it states, "if 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 utmost of my ability."[169] This was not taken lightly by any of the POWs, and often resulted in intense torture. POW Everett Alvarez recalls the Code of Conduct as, "always being the guideline. This is what you live by or you try to."[170] The guards employed multiple forms of torture, including starvation and lack of medical care, which was discussed in previous sections, as well as physical torture, humiliation and psychological torture.

Psychological torture was one of the primary methods used by the guards against the POWs. Perhaps the most prominent form of psychological torture was solitary confinement. If

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[167] Harris, *Tap Code,* 42.
[168] Denton, *When Hell Was in Session,* 23. It is important to note here that POWs were not turned over to civilian authorities. Rather, it was the camp guards that punished them, even.
[169] *Executive Order 10631—Code of Conduct for Members of the Armed Forces of the United States*, August 17, 1955, *The American Presidency Project*, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-10631-code-conduct-for-members-the-armed-forces-the-united-states.
[170] Everett Alvarez Jr., interview by Etta-Belle Kitchen, March 6, 1976, Oral History Collection, U.S. Naval Institute Press, 58.

POWs refused to answer questions or were perceived as having an attitude, they would be locked in dark rooms of solitude to sit alone with their thoughts for sometimes months on end. They were kept unaware of when their next interrogation would occur, or when they would be given their next meal or shower.

Denton learned firsthand the toll that solitary confinement could take on a POW's mental status. After refusing to answer questions that went beyond the scope of what was required through the Code of Conduct, Denton recalls being put into a small cell, "that virtually no crack of light could get through."[171] Not knowing the time of day for extended periods of time can take a drastic psychological toll on a person, regardless of their POW status. Assuming, to the best of his ability, that he had been locked in confinement for four days and four nights, Denton looked back on what he felt during that time, claiming, "I believed I was beginning to lose my grip. I couldn't keep my mind occupied."[172] Considering the only thing Denton was able to focus on was the darkness that enveloped him, he began to hallucinate. Denton began seeing unfamiliar faces that "floated along in the darkness and disappearing through the door. Strange noises came muffled out of the blankets draping the walls, and I dreamed constantly of an escape in which I crawled for miles."[173] Simultaneously, Denton faced constant anxiety wondering when his next physical torture session would be, something that will be discussed later in this section.

POW John McGrath wrote about the general experiences of POWs who were also subjected to solitary confinement. For example, a common experience among POWs consisted of being sentenced to three months in solitary confinement, "in a dark, damp bomb shelter dug underneath his bed."[174] While living in this shelter, this man's hands were tied behind his back,

[171] Denton, *When Hell Was in Session,* 48.
[172] Denton, *When Hell Was in Session,* 49.
[173] Denton, *When Hell Was in Session,* 50.
[174] McGrath, *Prisoner of War,* 66.

and his mosquito net taken from him, making it impossible to fight off the swarms of mosquitoes. McGrath claimed that, "the mosquitoes that live in these damp, dark holes will drive him insane," demonstrating yet another psychological side effect of total isolation and powerlessness.[175] McGrath himself was also subjected to solitary confinement during his time as a POW. Similar to Denton, McGrath recalls his time in solitary as one of the worst periods of time during his imprisonment. Looking back on that point in his capture, he expresses that, "few people can comprehend what it is like to be in solitary confinement for months or years at a time. Each minute of the day painfully drags by as you try to make your mind think of something new."[176] Further, he recalls a fellow POW, Howard Rutledge, being in solitary confinement for fifty-eight months, a significantly longer time than what the majority of POWs were subjected to.[177]

Another key aspect of solitary confinement was the fact that guards did not let the POWs sleep. Within the isolation cells, the furniture commonly consisted of a barstool and concrete floors. Prisoners were often shackled to the barstool, and even if they weren't, sleeping on the floor was not a viable option due to the presence of rodents. Speaking in a general sense for all POWs, McGrath explains how the guards would keep the men awake if they began to fall asleep on their stools: "Each time he would fall over, the guards would sit him upright. He was not allowed to fall asleep."[178] At night, McGrath recalls there being a guard who was known as, "the Mouse" who would, "throw buckets of cold water on a man on cold winter nights," if he were falling asleep on his stool.[179] Further, there was a man who goes unnamed in McGrath's book who lasted thirty-three days on the stool in confinement before giving up, meaning he might

[175] McGrath, *Prisoner of War,* 66.
[176] McGrath, *Prisoner of War,* 12.
[177] McGrath, *Prisoner of War,* 12.
[178] McGrath, *Prisoner of War,* 74.
[179] McGrath, *Prisoner of War,* 74; This guard was referred to as "The Mouse" because of his small stature.

have spoken to his captors. For a point of reference, it is recommended that adults, female and male, get at least six to seven hours of sleep a night in order to combat major health risks.[180] With an extended amount of sleep deprivation over long periods of time, such as thirty-three days, one's health deteriorates rapidly. Sleep deprivation can cause damage to someone's heart and circulatory system, as well as someone's immune system.[181] Sleep deprivation can also cause auditory and visual hallucinations, as with the case of Jeremiah Denton.

An interesting point of comparison here is the way the Soviet Union treated prisoners during World War II, about two decades before the Geneva Conventions were signed. To torture those in captivity, the Soviet Gulag guards would force the prisoners remain in a kneeling position for up to five days. While in this position, a Soviet guard would stand watch around the clock, so if the prisoner were to fall asleep, they would be immediately woken up.[182] In the Gulag, this would ultimately cause most prisoners to break, and share sought-out information. Given the history of this method being used to break people, it is possible that North Vietnam took a page out of the Soviet Union's handbook, and applied what was thought to be an effective method to their own prisoners. The Geneva Conventions state, "no physical or mental torture, nor any other form or coercion, may be inflicted on prisoners of war to secure from them information of any kind whatever. Prisoners of war who refuse to answer may not be threatened, insulted, or exposed to any unpleasant or disadvantageous treatment of any kind."[183] Although there have been allegations against the Soviet Union that they did not follow the Geneva Conventions, it is important to reiterate that this method of torture was used by the Soviets

[180] Institute of Medicine Committee on Sleep Medicine and Research, *Sleep Disorders and Sleep Deprivation: An Unmet Public Health Problem* (National Academies Press, 2006), https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK19961/
[181] "Sleep Deprivation: What It Is, Symptoms, Treatment & Stages," *Cleveland Clinic*, August 11, 2022, https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/23970-sleep-deprivation.
[182] Yochai Ataria, "Becoming Nonhuman: The Case Study of the Gulag," *Genealogy* 3, no. 2 (2019): 27, https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy3020027.
[183] *Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War,* pg 88.

before the Geneva Conventions, and it was used after the Geneva Conventions by North Vietnam; two countries that were allies during the Vietnam War and the Cold War.

The only time that POWs in solitary confinement could see the light of day, or even gauge the time of day, was during their physical torture sessions with the camp guards. Physical torture, however, was not isolated to POWs in solitary confinement; rather, it was a regular occurrence that every single POW endured throughout their time in the North Vietnam prisoner camps. The levels of torture varied: on the less cruel (but still brutal) side, POWs were burned with cigarettes or slapped across the face a few times by a guard. On the more intense side, POWs were tied up with what was known as the "rope trick," where they were locked in leg or wrist irons for months at a time; and in the most extreme cases, they were hung upside down until they lost consciousness. Although detailing the dozens of types of torture falls outside the scope of this discussion, it is important to examine a few in depth to understand and compare the extent of the overall treatment before and after Ho Chi Minh's death.

One of the most infamous and painful types of torture was the aforementioned 'rope trick.' During an interview, POW Commander Jack Fellowes was asked about the rope trick, and he described it as: "they tie your hands behind your back and pull it as tight as they can and they make you kneel on a board, a great big 2 by 8 wide thing."[184] Further, McGrath explains it as:

> The arms are repeatedly cinched up until the elbows are forced together. Sometimes at this point the 'hell cuffs' are applied. The 'hell cuffs' are handcuffs which are put on the upper arms and pinched as tightly as possible onto the arms, cutting off the circulation. If the prisoner had not broken down by this time, his arms are rotated until the shoulders dislocate.[185]

[184] Jack H. Fellowes, interview by John T. Mason, in *Prisoner of War Series*, vol. 1 (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute, 1976), 25.
[185] McGrath, *Prisoner of War,* 78.

Figure 3.1: POW John McGrath's depiction of the Vietnamese rope trick.[186]

Reading through the multiple accounts of POWs time in North Vietnam, this seemed to be, not only one of the most common forms of physical torture, but also the most painful. POW Robert Wideman recalls his experience being put into the rope trick for the first time, stating that, "the pain was mind-blowing, like a white-hot barbed wire slicing deep into the flesh of my elbows and plinking every nerve along the way until it reached bone."[187] POWs would endure this type of torture sometimes on a daily basis, until they either answered the question being asked of them, or until they fell unconscious from the pain.

Another common form of torture that POWs were continuously subjected to was the use of leg and arm irons and shackles. As discussed in the section about the physical set up of the prison camps, most of the beds within the cells had stocks at the bottom, into which men's ankles were forced, leaving them unable to move.[188] Over time, as the torture and beatings intensified, a man's ankles could be too swollen to fit into the cuffs, so "the guards would stand on the top bar to force it shut," often ripping the skin off the ankles and causing excruciating pain.[189] POW

[186] McGrath, *Prisoner of War,* 78.
[187] Robert Wideman and Cara Lopez Lee, *Unexpected Prisoner: Memoir of a Vietnam POW,* (Self-published, 2016), 41.
[188] McGrath, *Prisoner of War,* 76.
[189] McGrath, *Prisoner of War,* 76.

Larry Guarino recalls his first conversation with Jeremiah Denton over the dividing cell wall, as Guarino told him that he had been locked in the leg irons for over two weeks, and that later, a Vietnamese guard, "pushed up our sleeves and, with our arms behind us, clamped on a pair of adjustable ratchet handcuffs. He placed them high on the forearms, and then squeezed them right down to the bone."[190]

Not all torture accounts came from POWs refusing to answer questions. The most extreme forms of torture actually came from the POWs who attempted to escape. The North Vietnamese camps were surrounded by wires, electrical fencing, and countless miles of jungle, leaving little opportunity for escape. There was no way to predict what an escapee might encounter, whether it be a nearby Viet Cong village, or no civilization in sight. This deterred most from attempting escape, but there were two POWs, John Dramsi and Edwin Atterberry, who were determined to seize their freedom. In order to escape, everyone in Dramsi's and Atterberry's cell at the Zoo compound agreed to two rules to ensure a successful escape: "the first was that you'd have a means of communicating with friendly forces. The second was that you and your rescuers must have agreed upon a prearranged pickup point."[191] Dramsi and Atterberry met neither of these requirements, but they calculated a plan anyway.

On a Saturday morning, Dramsi and Atterberry decided the time was right, and managed to escape the Zoo. They were quickly captured and brought back to the prison early Sunday morning, where both men were extensively tortured, and only one of them ended up surviving. Torture would rarely result in death, but there were instances in which it did. A significant part of the Code of Conduct is, "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."[192]Although it is neither confirmed nor

[190] Guarino, *A P.O.W.'s Story,* 36 and 103.
[191] Halyburton, *Reflections of Captivity,* 98-99.
[192] *Executive Order 10631*, August 17, 1955.

denied, it is highly likely that Ed Atterberry died from the torture following his escape attempt.[193] Other POWs also housed in the Zoo faced extreme repercussions for Dramsi's and Atterberry's escape attempt. POWs not involved with the escape also endured months of extensive torture until the guards extracted all the details they could. This was the only attempt to flee from the North Vietnam prison camps during the Vietnam War.

Although POW Ron Storz did not attempt an escape, his life was taken from him by the tortuous hands of the Vietnamese prison guards. Storz was known among the camp as someone who resisted the endless torture gallantly.[194] About two years after his initial capture, his physical and mental condition were rapidly deteriorating due to the constant torture. He was not eating, he was unable to empty his *bo,* and the guards said they would only give him aid if he wrote an apology letter to Ho Chi Minh. His condition deteriorated over time, and the change in treatment after Ho's death came too late to save Storz from succumbing to his injuries. Denton assumed that the guards ditched Storz' body somewhere, as the "North Vietnamese were undoubtedly embarrassed about his condition and didn't want the other prisoners to see him."[195] Not only would his fellow POWs have a chance to say an official goodbye to him, neither would his wife and two children, as his body was never returned to the U.S.

Most, if not all POWs, faced extreme torture in individual sessions under the camp guards. In the early years of the war, however, those who had been captured first were all grouped together, and paraded around villages in Hanoi, which came to be known as the Hanoi March. On July 6, 1966, sixteen POWs who were living in the Briarpatch camp were taken from their cells, and they were stripped of their shirts.[196] After some time, the shirts were returned with

[193] Halyburton, *Reflections of Captivity,* 100.
[194] Denton, *When Hell Was in Session,* 143,
[195] Denton, *When Hell Was in Session,* 149.
[196] Hubbell, *A Definitive History*, 184.

three digit numbers carved into the back of them with no explanation, and these POWs were then, "blindfolded, divided into two groups of eight, and put aboard two trucks."[197] Some of the POWs taken from the Briarpatch included Everett Alvarez, Jeremiah Denton, Robinson Risner, and James Stockdale, all of whom have been discussed previously in this thesis.

Denton remembers July 6 as a normal day until four p.m., when "there was some nervous tapping between cells as the prisoners began to sense a different atmosphere."[198] The guards had come in and told some of the men they were, "going for a walk."[199] This proved not to be the case, and Denton's instinct about something being off were correct. Later that night, he was loaded onto one of the aforementioned trucks and was handcuffed to POW Bob Peel. About thirty minutes after boarding the trucks, the POWs arrived in an alley across from the main square in Hanoi, where they were informed that, "the people of North Vietnam wanted to demonstrate their anger," against the Americans.[200] Upon arrival at the main square, the prisoners who came from Briarpatch were united with about forty other prisoners from the different camps, all of them unsure of what awaited them.[201] The POWs were ordered to line up in pairs, and then behind one another. Soon, they were in what POW Bob Purcell deemed a parade, marching towards downtown Hanoi with North Vietnamese guards next to them, and North Vietnam citizens watching what was supposed to be the American walk of shame.[202]

As soon as the POWs were in sight of the villagers who came to witness the spectacle, "the crowd came roaring alive, gave itself over to an endless cacophony of rage."[203] Men, women, and children cursed at the POWs, while trucks with television cameras filmed the entire

[197] Hubbell, *A Definitive History*, 184.
[198] Denton, *When Hell Was in Session,* 82.
[199] Hubbell, *A Definitive History*, 185.
[200] Denton, *When Hell Was in Session,* 82.
[201] Hubbell, *A Definitive History*, 186.
[202] Hubbell, *A Definitive History*, 187.
[203] Hubbell, *A Definitive History*, 187.

event. Suddenly, the "roaring of the crowd picked up, intensified, grew angrier."[204] Quickly, the crowd attacked the POWs, hitting and kicking them, and throwing rocks at them.[205] As the crowd started closing in on the POWs and the guards, they "hurled bricks and bottles, and pressed close enough to pummel them with outstretched arms while the guards grabbed the men by the hair or used rifle butts to force them to lower their heads."[206] The "walk of shame" escalated to the point that the prison guards were forced to protect the POWs from an unruly crowd, rather than following the original plan of allowing the people to express their feelings about the war to the prisoners. Some historians, such as Stuart L. Rochester, even went so far as to say that the guards lost control.[207] When things went south, Risner recalls that, "the men and women began running in, hitting us on the fly. After one of them hit me with a judo chop, I almost went out."[208] At the end of the march, most POWs were pretty badly beaten up, as "some were bleeding and swollen and others sagging, semiconscious."[209]

After returning to their respective camps, POW Sam Johnson, who was being held at the Zoo, discovered what had happened in the main square of Hanoi through numerous taps between walls. Based on the knowledge he was able to receive, Johnson learned that during the march, the POWs fought for their lives, drawing on their, "last reserves of strength to fight their way through the crowd armed with clubs and stone and fueled by ignorance and hate."[210] This march was a defining moment for POWs, as even though they were placed in a humiliating situation, they all held onto the simple phrases yelled by Denton as they were walking through the streets:

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[204] Hubbell, *A Definitive History*, 188.
[205] Rochester, *The Battle Behind Bars,* 38.
[206] Stuart L. Rochester and Frederick T. Kiley, *Honor Bound: American Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia, 1961-1973,* (Naval Institute Press, 1999), 196.
[207] Rochester, *Honor Bound*, 196.
[208] Risner, *The Passing of the Night,* 129.
[209] Risner, *The Passing of the Night,* 129.
[210] Johnson, *Captive Warriors,* 109.

"You are Americans! Keep your heads up!"[211] Although being forced to fight in the streets is not considered a traditional form of torture, the POWs were attacked and beaten for resisting and defending the Code of Conduct and American military policy.

Figure 3.2: "Hanoi March before guards lost control. *First row* (left to right): Keirn and Berg; *second row,* Shumaker and Harris; *third row,* Byrne and Guarino.[212]

Conclusion

The conditions the POWs were forced to endure turned what seemed like a nightmare into an unimaginable reality. The prior treatment of POWs in other wars such as World War I and World War II was horrific enough to bring an international committee (the committee that established the Geneva Conventions) together to establish standards for treatment of POWs were there to be another war. With the Geneva Conventions being in place before the start of American involvement in Vietnam, POWs thought they were going to be treated in accordance

[211] Denton, *When Hell Was in Session,* 83.
[212] Rochester, *Honor Bound*, 196. Although I have not discussed all of the men in the picture, they were all POWs during the war, and had similar experiences to the POWs I have discussed.

with the Geneva Conventions. They could not have been more wrong. During their time in captivity, POWs faced starvation, life-threatening injuries, beatings, and torture in an attempt to receive American military intelligence. Some POWs fought to their death, determined not to give any information, while others succumbed to the torture, often feeling like traitors to their fellow POWs and their country. These servicemen experienced crises of faith and suicidal tendencies at the hands of the North Vietnamese guards, as their spirits were continuously broken down. The death of Ho Chi Minh, however, may very well have saved the lives of countless lives of POWs. Not only did the overall treatment of POWs improve after Ho's death in 1969, but the food quality became more nutritious, and the medical protections guaranteed by the Geneva Conventions were partially honored. This raises these key questions: Why did these changes occur after the death of Ho? How, specifically, did the government structure shift and why? Finally, what particular changes actually occurred in the POW camps that led to improved treatment? These are the questions I will answer throughout the remainder of this thesis.

Chapter Three: The Shift

"I was still grappling with the heat when September 2, 1969 arrived, the day Ho Chi Minh died, twenty-four years to the day since his declaration of independence from France. The camp fell into such silent stillness, I was struck again by the realization that the Vietnamese leader whom we POWs saw as an embodiment of evil was a beloved hero to our jailers. I had never seen our guards look so somber."[213] - From Lieutenant Robert Wideman, Prisoner of War, *Unexpected Prisoner: Memoir of a POW*

Understanding the political climate of Vietnam prior to American involvement is essential to the foundation of this thesis. Recapping the sentiments expressed at the beginning of this thesis, Vietnam was broken into two separate entities allowing for a basic comprehension of the beginning of the war. Second, this knowledge allows historians to trace the progression of American involvement, explaining how Americans were captured as POWs in North Vietnam. Finally, by analyzing the government structure and roles of key political figures in North Vietnam, I am able to make an argument that other historians have not: the treatment of prisoners of war changed after the death of Ho Chi Minh, and it was Prime Minister Pham Van Dong who was responsible for this change.

The Creation of Communist Vietnam

In 1945, after declaring independence from France, a communist provisional government titled the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) was established in North Vietnam under the leadership of president Ho Chi Minh. "At the time of its creation, the DRV was intended to serve as a government for all of Vietnam," yet the French remained in control in South Vietnam.[214] The French refused to let the communist North take control of the South which led to the French-Indochina war. Following the end of the French-Indochina War in 1954, a peace treaty was signed, concurrently with the signing of the Geneva Accords, temporarily separating

[213] Wideman, *Unexpected Prisoner,* 321.
[214] William J. Duiker, *Historical Dictionary of Vietnam*, 2nd ed. (Scarecrow Press, 1998), 65.

Vietnam into two countries. The goal of this treaty was to guarantee peace for two years; whereupon an election would be held between the leaders of North and South Vietnam in 1956. Whoever won said election, would reunify the country under their preferred type of government rule.

To reiterate the point that when the time came for the election, however, Ngo Dinh Diem, president of South Vietnam, refused to hold the election. Diem was unconvinced he could beat Ho Chi Minh, and although the French were no longer involved in the political affairs of the country, the United States filled their shoes. With full support from the United States, Diem thought he was going to be able to, "transform South Vietnam into a viable, anticommunist, democratic society," thus rejecting the terms of the Geneva Accords, and gearing up for a war with the North.[215] Following the refusal to participate in the agreed upon elections, it is fair to assume both sides knew a war was coming. The DRV had not signed the most recent edition of the Geneva Conventions – the 1949 edits including the proper treatment of prisoners of war – and with tensions rising, they decided it was time in 1957, to sign the Geneva Conventions, as a war was emerging. Since 1945, the government under Ho Chi Minh had been forming, and with war time came delegating different tasks to different people in the government.

Communism, as an ideology, offered the people of Vietnam a society, "with political, social, and economic stability."[216] In the aftermath of the French-Indochina war, people sought stability as they were enveloped in widespread famine with little hope for relief in sight. After establishing himself as a political leader, Ho used the vulnerability of the population to his advantage by supplying food, thus simultaneously building the Vietnamese communist party.

[215] Duiker, *Historical Dictionary of Vietnam,* 165.
[216] L. Shelton Woods, *Vietnam: A Global Studies Handbook* (ABC-CLIO Inc., 2002), 112.

After Ho implemented the idea of 'communism being a saving grace' into society, he organized a government structure that would become the face of North Vietnam.

The Democratic Republic of Vietnam's government operated under the National Party Congress (NPC), which can be broken down into three sub-sections: the central committee/the leadership, the cadre, and the basic unit.[217] The central committee, the part of the government Ho and Pham were a part of, consisted of approximately eighty members who were tasked with party organization, defense, unification, economic planning, propaganda, foreign relations, etc. The cadre created a link between the leadership and the basic party units, serving as a "social superman, the talented, dedicated, selfless individuals who work tirelessly to improve society."[218] Finally, the basic unit was a simple branch or chapter in the government. For the purposes of my work, I will be discussing only the central committee in depth as this is the section of the government Ho and Pham served.

Although the NPC was technically a large group of elected officials, the power remained with Ho, as his decisions dictated all courses of any future actions. More specifically, in a biography written about Ho Chi Minh by a close advisee, Troung Chinh, Troung claimed that the type of government Ho ran was, "using Marxism-Leninism as a compass, to correctly analyze the Vietnamese society, establish a class based nature of the revolution, fix its main driving forces," and to eliminate the weaker forces of the earlier Vietnamese revolutions, bringing him into power.[219] Members of the NPC did not question this system, rather, they supported it.

Following Ho Chi Minh's rise to power, he served as a member of the central committee, but as an individual, he held the most power. After the election of the president, a prime minister

[217] The National Party Congress is also referred to as the National People's Congress, the Third National Congress, or the National Assembly; Douglas Pike, *History of Vietnamese Communism, 1925–1976* (Hoover Institution Press, 1978), 96.
[218] Pike, *History of Vietnamese Communism*, 67-68.
[219] Pike, *History of Vietnamese Communism*, 59-60.

was elected based on the recommendation of the president. Once the two primary figures with the central committee were established – in the scope of my thesis being Pham Van Dong and Ho Chi Minh – the group of elected officials in the central committee made a multitude of decisions, the most prominent being, "to decide the amnesty and issues of war and peace."[220] More specifically, during the Vietnam War, the Party made fundamental goals, one of them being, "develop a strategy for the struggle in the South, that is, to achieve unification," a military-diplomatic task.[221]

The Korean War and The Prisoner of War Issue

Understanding how the Korean War ended reveals similarities to the end of the Vietnam War in regard to the release of POWs. Both wars were fought as proxy wars, conflicts within the scope of the Cold War. North Korea and North Vietnam both fought in favor of a communist government, while the U.S. intervened in each conflict in an effort to prevent the spread of communism to their southern counterparts. Neither war had a clear winner, and the so-called victors depend on who you ask, even to this day. Both the Vietnam War and the Korean War with the United States shared many commonalities, and the war ended in both of these countries when peace negotiations, especially regarding the treatment of American POWs, was brought to the table. What historians have learned about the treatment of POWs in Korea, is that it closely resembled the treatment of POWs in North Vietnam; some argue that Korea was even more brutal than the Hanoi March. For example, POWs in Korea were, "forced to march till they die," enduring winter conditions in summer clothes, and abandoned on the side of the road if they could not continue.[222] While on the Korean death march, POWs were starved, beaten, and forced

[220] "Vietnamese State, Its Structure and Operation during the Anti-American War Period (1954–1975)," *Vietnam Law Magazine*, February 25, 2011, https://vietnamlawmagazine.vn/vietnamese-state-its-structure-and-operation-during-the-anti-american-war-period-1954-1975-4419.html.
[221] Pike, *History of Vietnamese Communism*, 95.
[222] Sheila Miyoshi Jager, *Brothers at War: The Unending Conflict in Korea* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), 210.

to defecate on themselves and the people near them, as they were forbidden to stop walking.[223] Sixty POWs in Korea were stuffed into rooms that were meant to only fit a few dozen, living in one another's filth. The treatment in both Korea and Vietnam significantly changed after it became a pivotal aspect of peace negotiations for both wars.[224]

The issue of POWs in Korea became one of the most heavily discussed topics during the Korean War, as both the U.S. and North Korea strongly favored their return.[225] It was not until the POWs were returned to the U.S. that serious peace negotiation talks began. During the same time this was happening in Korea, Vietnam was at war with the French. Both countries were in talks with one another, so it is probable that the Vietnamese, including Pham Van Dong, knew that the Koreans were going to return the POWs to America in order to achieve peace. Both North and South Vietnam had delegates at the Geneva Conference in 1954, where Pham signed the Geneva Accords on behalf of Vietnam, and most likely listened to the Korean War negotiations take place. Because Pham was at the same conference that ended the Korean War, it is possible he was observing the tactics used by both sides for them both to receive their desired outcome, which unbeknownst to him, he would use a little under two decades later. An essential aspect of advancing the South was release of American POWs, which required better treatment and ensuring they were ready to return home.

It is fair to assume that the quality of food and hygiene increased so that if the POWs were to be used as a tool of negotiation and peace, they would appear to be well-fed and well taken care of, as opposed to the emancipated appearance of the Korean POWs at the end of the

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[223] Jager, *Brothers at War,* 212.
[224] Prisoners of War and Peace Negotiations," *Encyclopedia.com*, https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/prisoners-war-and-peace-negotiations.
[225] Allan R. Millet, "Korean War," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, February 20, 2026, https://www.britannica.com/event/Korean-War.

Korean War. This reinforces my central argument, which suggests that in order to get the United States out of the war faster, Pham Van Dong closely followed the Geneva Conventions, resulting in better treatment of POWs. Many of the POWs believed this as well, as Jeremiah Denton thought that, "the North Vietnamese believed that President Nixon was going to try to carry the war to a successful conclusion, and that they might be held accountable for their crimes. They wanted us to go home in good condition."[226] Similarly, POW Sam Johnson recognized this increase in food quality and quantity as a good sign, as they were trying to fatten them up and make them look better for possible release.[227]

Context of the War

Around the time of Ho's death, America had been involved in the Vietnam War for four years, and the entire country of Vietnam had been fighting for centuries. By this point, all parties involved were exhausted and locked in a stalemate, unsure how the war could be won, or whether it would continue without resolution. Negotiations with North Vietnam were off the table, as Pham stated in a speech in 1968, "the United States has provoked war and aggression, it must end its war and aggression. The United States has escalated the conflict, it must deescalate it."[228] This shows, from the perspective of North Vietnamese, they were willing to fight until their last breaths if the U.S. were not to negotiate a deal. For every soldier that died in North Vietnam, another stood ready to replace him. Pham Van Dong was so confident in this, that in 1966 he told the *New York Times*, "that although the United States was far stronger militarily, it would lose in the end because more Vietnamese than Americans were prepared to die for Vietnam."[229]

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[226] Denton, *When Hell Was in Session,* 151.
[227] Johnson, *Captive Warriors,* 195.
[228] Phạm Văn Đồng, *Forward, Final Victory Will Be Ours!* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1968), 55.
[229] Harrison E. Salisbury, *Behind the Lines—Hanoi* (Harper & Row, 1967), 194-197.

The tides of war shifted around the same time as the speech Pham gave in 1968 with the Tet Offensive. In July 1967, communist leaders began to devise a plan that would, "ideally break the stalemate between North Vietnam and U.S. backed South Vietnam," launching some sort of attack so significant that it would convince the United States they could not win the war.[230] There is debate in the historical field as to whether the U.S. knew this attack was coming, but nonetheless, in January of 1968, thirty-five hundred North Vietnamese communist forces attacked allied forces in the Kontum province in South Vietnam, gaining control of thirty-six of South Vietnam provincial capitals, using intense guerilla warfare tactics to hold their ground. The Tet Offensive lasted for several months, bringing in more and more communist troops and supplies, not concluding until March, 1968. Eventually, the United States was able to drive the communists out of South Vietnam, but such a big military move caused high casualties and infrastructure devastation. It is estimated that tens of thousands communists were killed, and although the South and the United States forces put up a good fight, "tremendous damage had been done to South Vietnam, high casualties, a collapse of the pacification program, and the psychological blow of the offensive to American hopes and plans."[231] Although the communists lost a significantly larger number of troops than the U.S. and South Vietnam, North Vietnam had the resources to replace both the lives lost and the machinery destroyed, whereas the South did not, and the U.S. did not want to lose any more resources.

President Lyndon B. Johnson was unable to see a way to recover from Tet and the other military disasters of the previous years, so when he decided not to run for reelection, President Richard Nixon took his place in 1969, convinced that, "he had a 'secret plan' to end the war."[232]

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[230] Britannica Editors, "Tet Offensive," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, January 24, 2026, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tet-Offensive.
[231] Wawro, *The Vietnam War,* 279.
[232] Wawro, *The Vietnam War,* 349.

Nixon stated that, "he would break the policies and mistakes of the past." The so-called "secret plan" meant making concessions in Paris, negotiating with other communist countries to weaken their links to Vietnam, less American troops in Vietnam, expansion into Cambodia and Laos for different attacking perspectives, and resuming the bombing of North Vietnam.[233] The North Vietnamese had a plan going into 1969 as well, launching attacks that killed thousands more Americans before Nixon was able to properly execute his plan. It seemed that for every attack the Americans made, the North Vietnamese were prepared for it, and they retaliated with ten times the force. Nixon ultimately abandoned the idea of a secret plan, as the communists continued to fight with full intensity. Rather than pursuing a military victory over the North, Nixon shifted his goal to South Vietnamese self-determination and honorable peace. At this point in the war, the U.S. military was in shambles, and less than forty-percent of the U.S. population supported the war effort.[234]

Although the North Vietnamese were succeeding on the military front, their economy was collapsing, they suffered major civilian casualties, and napalm was destroying their country. After signing of the Geneva Accords and prior to American involvement in Vietnam, North Vietnam's economy was relatively stable, as a government report on the economy of North Vietnam stated, "the construction of a number of modern plants greatly increased industrial output."[235] With the escalation in American military involvement and increased bombing campaigns, however, the same report stated:

> Since 1965 the drain of war and the destruction from two bombing campaigns have caused declines in output, and GNP remains below its earlier peak. Farm output suffered from adverse weather in several years,

[233] Wawro, *The Vietnam War,* 349.
[234] Wawro, *The Vietnam War,* 356.
[235] Central Intelligence Agency, Directorate of Intelligence, *The Intelligence Handbook: The Economy of North Vietnam*, 1972, Approved for Release 2005, 2, https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP85T00875R001500200008-2.pdf

> manpower strains, and the war's competition for scarce resources. A large part of modern industry was rendered inoperative either from physical bomb damage or indirect effects, such as lack of raw materials, shortage of electricity, or transportation bottlenecks.[236]

Napalm attacks also contributed to the decline of the Vietnamese economy. Developed during World War II, napalm is a mix of "organic acids used to thicken gasoline for use as an incendiary in flamethrowers and in firebombs."[237] In Vietnam specifically, napalm was used to clear foliage in an effort to deny cover or camouflage to communists along military bases, rail lines, roads, rivers, and canals, white also acting as "a herbicide to destroy the crops that fed the enemy."[238] The U.S. would also release a chemical that is known as Agent Orange over enemy territory, permanently damaging the soil used to grow crops as well as causing irreversible medical issues to those that came in contact with it. Further, in large doses, Agent Orange "caused birth defects in mice and produced a disfiguring skin disease in men and women who came in contact with it."[239]

Considering Ho's intense commitment to his country's victory, he had very little concern for the money and human lives it cost. With massive casualties on both sides, the economy falling apart, and agricultural wounds that would take decades to heal, Ho pushed forward with the war effort. Members of the collective leadership might have been more willing to put an end to the war because of the damage it was doing to the country, and with Ho no longer around to dictate political, economic, and military decisions, they might have been more inclined to push for peace negotiations. Because of the casualties and failed operations the United States faced,

[236] CIA, *The Intelligence Handbook: The Economy of North Vietnam*, 2.
[237] Britannica Editors, "Napalm," Encyclopedia Britannica, October 17, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/science/napalm.
[238] Burns and Ward, *The Vietnam War*, 82.
[239] Burns and Ward, *The Vietnam War*, 530.

they were also more willing to negotiate, as seen when Nixon shifted his goal in South Vietnam to self-determination.

Ho Chi Minh, Pham Van Dong, and Ho's Death

As previously stated, Ho and Pham shared a strong personal and political bond. Freshly out of secondary school, Pham Van Dong participated in a socialist, youth organization that was formed by Ho Chi Minh.[240] From that point forward, the two became inseparable. Pham recalls Ho, "being a simple man," who dedicated his entire personal life to the revolution and to revolutionary ideas shared between them.[241] They grew and learned together, eventually creating the DRV, where Ho Chi Minh would act as the president, and Pham Van Dong the prime minister. Historian Hammond Rolph described Pham's relationship to Ho as, "Ho's oldest and closest colleague in the upper hierarchy," who carried out the day-to-day operations in the wake of Ho's death.[242] Upon the war's conclusion, Pham wrote a book titled *Ho Chi Minh: a Man, a Nation, An Age, and a Cause,* describing Ho's character, their relationship, and the political bond that the two of them shared. They first met in 1926 in a class taught by Ho, after which Pham worked closely with Ho until his final days.[243] They would discuss politics, the country, general life events, and the future of mankind. A few months before Ho's death, Pham recalls a conversation prominent politicians and Ho had, in which "he was very tired but told us of his devout wish to go South."[244] Further, Ho explicitly stated, "It is now when our southern fellow –

[240] "Vietnam: A Television History; Interview with Pham Van Dong," interview conducted February 19, 1981, *American Archive of Public Broadcasting* (GBH and the Library of Congress). https://www.americanarchive.org/catalog/cpb-aacip-15-bv79s1kr20
[241] "Vietnam: A Television History"; Interview with Pham Van Dong.
[242] Rolph Hammond, "Ho Chi Minh: Fifty Years of Revolution," *Studies in Comparative Communism* 1, no. 1/2 (1968): 101, http://www.jstor.org/stable/45366612.
[243] Phạm Văn Đồng, *Ho Chi Minh: A Man, a Nation, an Age, and a Cause* (Thế Giới Publishers, 1999), 58-59.
[244] Phạm Văn Đồng, *Ho Chi Minh*, 69.

countrymen are fighting and making sacrifices that it is most meaningful to go South."[245] Pham made Ho's dying wish his demand.

Figure 3.1. Photograph of Ho Chi Minh and Pham Van Dong together.[246]

Ho's death did not just devastate Pham, but as historian Glenn Robins explains, it devastated the North Vietnamese community as well. Ho was their beloved leader, the man they considered "the Bringer of Light." Robins explained that, "the international community paid tribute to the revolutionary leader by sending more than 22,000 messages of condolence to the government in Hanoi."[247] In addition to the messages of condolence, there was a demonstration of national mourning which drew over one hundred thousand people.[248] Although a majority of the North Vietnamese community experienced some level of grief in the aftermath of Ho's death. The reaction of the camp guards offers a unique perspective, showing how their behaviors shifted almost instantly.

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[245] Phạm Văn Đồng, *Ho Chi Minh*, 69.
[246] Marc Riboud, *President Ho Chi Minh and Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, Hanoi*, 1968, photograph, Minneapolis Institute of Art, https://collections.artsmia.org/art/104249/president-ho-chi-minh-and-prime-minister-pham-van-dong-marc-riboud.

[247] Robins, *The Longest Rescue*, 93.
[248] Robins, *The Longest Rescue*, 93.

When news of Ho's death reached the camp guards, it was clear they were emotionally vulnerable. The guards at Alcatraz, for example, "broke into a storage cell and took drugs and wine, and while messages of condolence from other countries were being read endlessly on the camp radio, they wept and got drunk."[249] POW Sam Johnson was at Alcatraz when the guards learned of Ho's passing, and on the morning of September 3, he recalls waking up to the "clanging sound of church bells somewhere in the city. The guards, moving silently as if in a stupor, entered our cells wearing black arm bands, their faces masks of grief."[250] It is fair to assume that the POWs were not particularly sad about the death of Ho, rather, they were worried about the implications for themselves. Similar to Johnson, POW James Mulligan recalls his time in Alcatraz when fellow POWs Howard Rutledge, Jeremiah Denton, and Harry Jenkins endured frequent torture in the weeks leading up to Ho's death, then suddenly, the torture ceased. The POWs learned later that this was because of Ho's death. POW Porter Halyburton also recalls this day, saying:

> In September 1969, after Ho Chi Minh died, the Vietnamese must have taken a critical look at what their policy governing the treatment of American POWs had accomplished toward achieve their strategic goals… and it became obvious that the use of torture and inhumane treatment was in violation of the Geneva Conventions of 1949, which they had signed, was having the opposite effect upon public opinion.[251]

Based on this quote alone, it is hard to say who actually made the call regarding the treatment of American POWs, but all POWs noticed a significant shift.

POW Jeremiah Denton recalled speculating about Ho's successor, hoping that the new leadership would bring improvements in their treatment.[252] Denton's hopes were realized, as

[249] Robins, *The Longest Rescue*, 93.
[250] Johnson, *Captive Warriors,* 189-190.
[251] Halyburton, *Reflections of Captivity,* 123.
[252] Denton, *When Hell Was in Session,* 146.

almost immediately following Ho's death, "subtle changes began to take place."[253] Food and hygiene conditions improved considerably, medical care was provided when necessary, and perhaps most importantly, torture essentially stopped. Clearly, these were all life changing improvements for the POWs; the question was what prompted the sudden change? Historians who have studied and written about the Vietnam War and POWs have all noticed this drastic shift in their treatment, yet most, if not all, have been unable to answer why it happened when it did. This has remained unanswered since the 1970s, as historian John Hubbell was unable to provide an explanation in his work, and modern-day literature has likewise been unable to offer an answer. While they attribute the change to Ho's death, none have explored the underlying reason of why, which is what I will do in the remainder of this chapter.

In an interview conducted in 1981 with prime minister Pham Van Dong, he was asked to describe not only his personal reaction to Ho's death, but also the thought process of how the government would conduct itself moving forward, having lost their most powerful leader. Pham's response was:

> This was such a painful thing to the nation and to me personally that there are simply no words which can describe it. But to us, it was not just a painful thing only. The question was how to continue with his work in a deserving way, how to maintain unity in order to continue and to strongly develop the struggle so as to achieve victory and how to accomplish all the things he wanted us to accomplish especially those which he mentions in his testament.[254]

Creating a united force and continuing Ho's legacy is exactly what the DRV did.

Changes After 1969 & Peace Negotiations

Unlike other communist governments at this time, such as China and North Korea, Ho did not explicitly name his successor. Because of this, the ruling members of the NPC

[253] Denton, *When Hell Was in Session,* 146.
[254] "Vietnam: A Television History"; Interview with Pham Van Dong.

established a collective leadership. Collective leadership is a governing style that exists within the communist school of thought, but instead of power belonging to one individual, it is distributed among the top political figures in the central committee. The goal of creating a collective leadership was to, "promote political solidarity and unity nationwide."[255] That being said, following Ho's death, central committee members Le Duan, Truong Chinh, Le Duc Tho, and Pham Van Dong, assumed political control.[256]

Even though these men were a collective unit, they all played different roles, especially where war efforts were concerned. Le Duan became the official president after Ho. He was known for being a careful administrator, and master manipulator, similar to Ho.[257] Le Duan advocated for increased military involvement in the South, presumably to end the war as quickly as possible. Truong Chinh was known for his ultramilitant ideas, and willingness to use force by any means possible to end the war.[258] Le Duc Tho is best known for his role in the Paris peace talks, and he was labeled the chief Vietnamese negotiator.[259] This leaves Pham Van Dong, was "the polished, urbane Party figure and single-minded administrator who created the DRV bureaucracy under Ho's tutelage, and ran it for more than three decades."[260] After Ho's death, Pham retained his role of prime minister, where he was tasked with being the "country's principal early negotiator with external powers."[261] Because he was not seen as the primary leader after Ho's death, and his political affiliations slowly dissolved after the war, historians often downplay his importance.

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[255] Ha Hoang Hop and Lye Liang Fook, "Communist Party of Vietnam Leadership Appointments – The Geography Factor," (Yusof Ishak Institute, 2021), 9, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/ISEAS_Perspective_2021_1.pdf.
[256] Robert A. Scalapino and Dalchoong Kim, eds., *Asian Communism: Continuity and Transition* (Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1988), 94.
[257] Pike, *History of Vietnamese Communism*, 61.
[258] Pike, *History of Vietnamese Communism*, 61.
[259] Duiker, *Historical Dictionary of Vietnam,* 126.
[260] Pike, *History of Vietnamese Communism*, 63.
[261] Pike, *History of Vietnamese Communism*, 63.

When it came time to negotiate peace with the United States, the U.S. had already started a campaign on behalf of American prisoners of war in Vietnam in August 1969, but following the death of Ho, they were able to implement it very quickly.[262] Although the campaign received widespread attention, the ultimate decisions regarding POWs treatment was still determined by North Vietnam, guided by what they would benefit from making any changes.

Many thought of the peace negotiations as being held solely between Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho. As previously mentioned, however, Pham was the earliest negotiator during the Vietnam War, and stood alongside Le Duc during key portions of the peace negotiations. Some historians have even gone as far as to claim that, "Le Duc Tho's secret negotiations with Henry Kissinger were endorsed and probably directed by Pham Van Dong."[263] Pham, perhaps taking a page from the Korean War, understood that peace negotiations with America would only be considered if POWs were treated in accordance with the Geneva Conventions. In sections of the peace negotiations transcripts involving Pham, he and Kissinger are the primary speakers, working together to establish the objectives of the meeting. It is fair to assume Pham spoke up during the meetings in order to provide a foundation for the meeting, paving the way for Le Duan to speak on behalf of the entirety of the North Vietnamese government. Shifting to a collective leadership after Ho's death meant that all peace negotiations and terms were decided on jointly.

In February of 1973, Pham, Le Duc, and Kissinger sat down to discuss final negotiations.[264] Throughout the entirety of the peace negotiations, this marked the first time

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[262] Henry Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War: A History of America's Involvement in and Extrication from the Vietnam War* (Simon & Schuster, 2003), 102.
[263] Steve Thompson, Jennifer Llewellyn, and Jim Southey, "Pham Van Dong," *Alpha History — Vietnam War*, March 2, 2018, https://alphahistory.com/vietnamwar/pham-van-dong/.
[264] *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, vol. XLII, "Memorandum of Conversation 1," Hanoi, February 11, 1973, Document 51, Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v42/d51.

Pham met Kissinger in person. Prior to Pham's participation, Kissinger and Le Duc had met eighteen times, and remained locked in a stalemate. Perhaps both parties recognized the need to include Pham in order to make any substantial progress. Because of the collective leadership government style, it is fair to assume that Le Duc was heavily influenced by Pham, not only because he was a part of this collective leadership, but also because Pham was the early negotiator with external powers – a position that shifted to Le Duc after the death of Ho. Pham likely played a significant role in shaping the terms of the peace negotiations, even though he was not the one to make it official.

After concluding the discussion of chapter two of the conventions, Kissinger asked if he could proceed to the discussion of chapter three. It is not Le Duc who gave him the go ahead on this, rather, it was Pham. Kissinger continued by claiming, "I have explained to Special Advisor Le Duc Tho on many occasions our extreme concern with respect to prisoners."[265] It seems as if Kissinger directly addressed Pham in regard to this conversation, implying that Pham had a greater role in determining the treatment of POWs than previously acknowledged. In a small footnote regarding his interaction and meeting with both Pham and Le Duc present, Kissinger made the note that it was during the conference that the "release of all our POWs could be in stages, in parallel with the withdrawal of all U.S. troops from South Vietnam," a goal Pham had since the beginning of the war.[266]

In the first meeting where all three political figures were present, they reviewed the terms of the Geneva Conventions of 1949, and discussed the ways in which they believed each country violated certain aspects of the convention. Kissinger expressed his frustration with the fact that

[265] *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, vol. XLII, "Memorandum of Conversation 1," Hanoi, February 10, 1973, Document 50, Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v42/d50
[266] *FRUS, 1969–1976*, vol. XLII, Doc. 50.

he did not know the status or conditions of POWs, whether any of them were still alive, and how many remained imprisoned. Kissinger was given a list of the POWs, which he presumed was incomplete, based on standard negotiating tactics, but Kissinger said, "Pham Van Dong replied noncommittally that the lists handed over were complete."[267] The lists were in fact incomplete, but this was a strategy potentially used by Pham to push negotiations to move quicker. The fact that Pham had a list of POW names, in addition to a 1981 interview in which he elaborated on his interactions with the POWs, demonstrates that he had direct engagement with them. In the 1981 interview with the WGBH Educational Foundation, he elaborates on the interaction he had with POWs after the Gulf of Tonkin incident:

> Everybody knows that it was only a ploy by the United States government to persuade the American Congress and the American people to allow it to start a war in Vietnam, especially through the use of bombs and artillery shells to destroy the North… Subsequently there was a fight between the American airplanes and the Vietnamese air defense. Shortly thereafter, an American plane was down and a pilot captured. I met with this pilot, named Everett Alvarez before going back to Hanoi. This was the first American pilot captured in Vietnam.[268]

This quote shows the direct knowledge Pham had about the POWs. Further in this interview he claims that Alvarez was the first, implying that many followed after, a list of which Henry Kissinger wanted from him.

After carefully examining each aspect of the Geneva Conventions, it was Pham, not Le Duc, who established the final rules and agreements for the peace negotiations between the two countries. Pham, while discussing the negotiation agreements, states, "it is [the Vietnam War] completely different from the situation after the signing of the 1954 Geneva Agreement. It is also completely different from the situation in 1960, and completely different from the situation in

[267] Kissinger, *Ending the Vietnam War*, 443.
[268] "Vietnam: A Television History"; Interview with Pham Van Dong.

1969."[269] Further, Pham goes on to say that if, and because, America began to show a greater respect for the fight between the Vietnamese states, the Geneva, "agreements will be implemented," with emphasis on chapters three, four, and five.[270] Pham Van Dong suggesting that these chapters would be followed more precisely not only allows for the interpretation that he had significant amount of control over the POWs following Minh's death, but that prior to the discussion with Kissinger, he moved to improve their treatment because he knew it would be a beneficial negotiation technique in the future.

On February 10, 1973, Pham attended another meeting and opened it up with a statement recalling the time he spent as a prisoner to the French. Discussing with Kissinger the hardships that came with prison life, Pham highlighted the hardships in the French prisons. In 1929, Pham was arrested for revolutionary activity, and imprisoned at the Con Dao Island Prison, where the French kept him under close surveillance.[271] Con Dao prison became known as "Hell on Earth," where prisoners experienced, "unimaginable suffering, torture, malnutrition, and deplorable conditions."[272] In extreme cases, prisoners would be put in what was known as a "tiger cage," where they were forced underground with steel bars for a ceiling. French guards would stand above the cages, and "poke at prisoners like tigers in a Victorian-era zoo. Prisoners were beaten with sticks from above, and sprinkled with quicklime and water, which burnt their skin and caused blindness."[273]

[269] *FRUS, 1969–1976*, vol. XLII, doc. 50.
[270] *FRUS, 1969–1976*, vol. XLII, doc. 50.
[271] Hills and Morris, *Ho Chi Minh's Blueprint for Revolution*, 69.
[272] "Con Dao Prison," *Vinpearl*, January 20, 2024, https://vinpearl.com/en/con-dao-prison
[273] "Tiger Cages," *Lonely Planet*, https://www.lonelyplanet.com/points-of-interest/tiger-cages/1391605

Figure 3.1: This is a photograph depicting the "Tiger Cages" in the Con Dao Prison. While a prisoner, this is the type of treatment Pham Van Dong received.[274]

The treatment Pham received as a prisoner could provide a possible explanation for his contributions to improving the treatment of POWs. It was the French imperialists who imprisoned him and treated him savagely, and considering the shocking similarities between the two prisons, Pham had firsthand knowledge of subhuman treatment. Ho was also a prisoner, but his time was spent at a Victorian Prison in Hong Kong, where he was forced to do hard labor, and was never allowed to communicate with others. These two different prison experiences speak volumes to the way American POWs were treated. In comparison to the Hanoi Hilton and Con Dao, it seems Ho was housed in better conditions, which may have influenced him to act harsher to receive the information he sought. Unlike Ho, Pham understood the experience of being forced to speak out against one's country. Believing that if the POWs were going to offer any useful information, they would have done it under threat of torture, he thought treating them better would yield more results.

[274] "Tiger Cages," *Lonely Planet.*

Conclusion

Prior to his death, Ho Chi Minh had been in constant communication with the United States, advocating for peace negotiations and U.S. troop withdrawal from both North and South Vietnam. In a message to the American people in 1966, most likely via speech, Ho claimed that, "the U.S Government has continually clamoured about 'peace negotiations' in an attempt to deceive the American and the world peoples. But the Vietnamese people will never submit."[275] Based on this quote from Ho, regardless of whether the U.S. intended to pursue peace negotiations, Ho made it clear that the North Vietnamese people would not accept any terms until their demands were met. Ho adopted the military fighting method known as *Dau Tranh* – the struggle – a strategy that meant winning the war by any means necessary. This tactic included conventional combat operations, guerilla attacks, sabotage, terrorism, assassination, kidnapping, and insurrection, essentially anything that would exhaust the enemy to make them surrender faster.[276]

As mentioned earlier, Ho's declining health limited his involvement in war making decisions, however, *Dau Tranh* persisted. After his death the collective leadership concluded that engaging in peace negotiations would better serve the North Vietnamese war effort instead of allowing America to continue to fight. It was not until February 1970, that peace negotiations were taken seriously between the two countries, just shortly after the death of Ho Chi Minh. According to POW testimonies, the war's intensity lessened on both sides, with fewer air raids, and a decrease in American soldier kidnappings. Being Ho's "right hand man" for lack of a

[275] "Messages to America: The Letters of Ho Chi Minh," *History Is A Weapon*, https://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon2/hochiminh/
[276] Martin G. Clemis, "The Enduring Lessons of Vietnam: Implications for US Strategy and Policy," *Parameters* 55, no. 2 (Summer 2025): 117–134, U.S. Army War College Press, https://publications.armywarcollege.edu/News/Display/Article/4218109/the-enduring-lessons-of-vietnam-implications-for-us-strategy-and-policy/.

better term, Pham saw the *Dau Tranh* policy in action, and while it achieved the intended results, he waited until Ho's death to implement peace talks.

Although absolute certainty is impossible, the evidence provided strongly suggests that Pham Van Dong was likely the key decision maker concerning the treatment of POWs. Pham's relationship with Ho both within and outside of the government, provided him with deep insight into the state of the war; what was working, and what was not. Rather than continuing Ho's total war approach, Pham took a different approach. He instituted better treatment for POWs in an effort to end the war quickly, which positioned the country to fully advance towards the goal of total communism.

Chapter Four: Treatment of Prisoners of War After 1969

"Ho Chi Minh's death provided the North with an opportunity to try to repair damage by revising its policy toward us, and the result was a significant improvement in treatment for POWs."[277] - From Porter Alexander Halyburton, Prisoner of War *Reflections On Captivity: A Tapestry of Stories by a Vietnam War POW*

Although Ho's death was devastating for the North Vietnamese population, it proved to be one of the most consequential events for POWs, and their treatment began to improve significantly. At the time, none of the POWs understood the reasons for the change, but some attributed it to Ho's death, as discussed in the previous chapter, while others feared it was too good to be true. Regardless of the reason, POWs across the northern camps began receiving more humane treatment, and while it was not completely in accordance with the Geneva Conventions, it was better than what they had endured during Ho's reign. This chapter explores specific types of improvements implemented in the POW camps, and how these changes transformed the lives of the POWs.

Hygienic Improvement & Living Quality After 1969

In the wake of Ho Chi Minh's death, changes unfolded quickly within the camps. One significant change was that POWs were allowed to receive packages from home. As long as the packages did not exceed 6.6 pounds, and adhered to the list of specified items, POWs could receive a wide variety of goods. Family members and friends from home could now send hygiene items such as soap, toothbrushes, toothpaste, towels, and warm clothing; all of which the POWs had been denied access to, or were offered in subpar quality.[278] POWs were finally moved to the more communal living area of the Hanoi Hilton, Camp Unity. Most of the communication regulations had been lifted, and POWs would often combine their goods, sharing with those who might not have received items from home.

[277] Halyburton, *Reflections of Captivity,* 125.
[278] Robins, *The Longest Rescue*, 103.

As previously mentioned, Camp Unity was part of the Hanoi Hilton compound, but POWs named this section Camp Unity because, "Americans had never been held in the large cells in this part of the Hanoi Hilton, but now we were all in one place."[279] General Risner recalls his move to Camp Unity, claiming he was unable to express the feeling he had when he arrived there. Risner saw, "forty-six people altogether – laughing and shouting, grabbing one another, hugging and shaking hands," something that was strictly prohibited in years prior.[280] Because they were now in one place, many prisoners organized educational classes and religious services to maximize the use of their time in captivity.

POW Porter Halyburton, for example, taught a German language class for beginners. Drawing on his memory of a college course, Halyburton held weekly classes to teach fellow prisoners the language.[281] Being able to communicate was important, but the ability to gather and engage in collective learning was a significant innovation for the POWs. Similarly, other POWs partook in traditional classes covering subjects such as, "history, political science, foreign languages, mathematics, music, art, and literature, as well as hobby-oriented offerings such as chess, beekeeping, poultry farming, skiing, and auto maintenance."[282] Most of the POWs were already college educated, so the courses they taught to one another stemmed from what they remembered from their college backgrounds. These classes usually took place in what they called the game room. For POWs who chose not to engage in the school-style structure, they had access to the yard to, "exercise outside every other day, play ping-pong for a half-hour, and play French pool in the game room."[283] POWs were even allowed to run laps around the courtyard without it being considered an escape attempt. POW James Quincy Collins remembers the first

[279] Halyburton, *Reflections of Captivity,* 129.
[280] Risner, *The Passing of the Night,* 208.
[281] Halyburton, *Reflections of Captivity,* 137-138.
[282] Robins, *The Longest Rescue*, 114.
[283] Denton, *When Hell Was in Session,* 153.

changes after Ho Chi Minh's death, saying, "we could just walk. We could walk around, do whatever small exercises we wanted to do."[284] Previous to 1969, these freedoms were unthinkable within the walls of these camps.

Upon their transfer to Camp Unity, POWs were enthusiastic about the prospect of attending a proper, communal church service.[285] To make it feel more official, the POWs elected someone to preach for them, and decided that although there were numerous denominations of Christians, they all prayed to the same God, therefore it was acceptable to hold services together. These services offered the POWs a sense of peace and unity in regard to religion, something they were unable to feel before, while they often prayed alone in their cells.

Although minimally, hygienic conditions improved. With the increase in arrivals of packages from home that commonly contained soap and towels, POWs were able to bathe at their convenience, without restrictions on time or amount of water used.[286] Hot water was still rare, but water accessibility became more abundant for the POWs overall. The bathrooms within Camp Unity differed from the unsanitary facilities previously described as they had French-built toilets which provided a pedestal to stand on while doing your business, as well as a bucket to place used toilet paper.[287] Instead of dumping the waste into a random ditch or on the prison grounds, someone was assigned to burn the used toilet paper each morning, and then clean the bucket out afterwards.[288]

[284] Collins, Interview, 134.
[285] Risner, *The Passing of the Night,* 215.
[286] Robins, *The Longest Rescue*, 113-114.
[287] McGrath, *Prisoner of War,* 106.
[288] McGrath, *Prisoner of War,* 106.

Food Quality After 1969

After 1969, the quality and quantity of food for POWs increased. Upon arrival to the camps prior to 1969, prisoners were typically given a small tin cup with two-quarts of water to last them the day. Following 1969, however, prisoners were given large aluminum pots, substantially increasing the amount of water available to them each day.[289] Also, rather than only receiving two meals a day, POWs got a morning meal which included a piece of bread and sugar. The bread was no longer stale, and more often than not, came out of the oven nice and warm.[290] The meals they were provided later in the day included tea and fresh bananas, as well as the occasional cup of coffee.[291] POWs were even allowed to take extra provisions if there were any available. Denton remembers one instance of getting food, where the guard encouraged him to take two slices of bread, instead of the standard one.[292] Although this seems minimal, POWs were ecstatic by this development. Holidays also offered a new and improved diet, as POW Mulligan recalled the Christmas of 1971, "we got a special meal of turkey, a salad, and soup. They even served us beer and some strong rice wine."[293]

POWs were also able to participate more in the food preparation itself, rather than just doing the dishes. Many POWs would make what became known as coal balls, a black ball that was made up of mixed water, sometimes snow, and coal.[294] This is what would be used as fuel to cook the food, and often while the food was being cooked by the Vietnamese, the POWs would help gather other supplies for meals around the camp such as potatoes or green beans. As the war negotiations progressed, and the end of their captivity neared, food quality improved, and

[289] McGrath, *Prisoner of War,* 94.
[290] Johnson, *Captive Warriors,* 195.
[291] Mulligan, *The Hanoi Commitment*, 208 and 214.
[292] Denton, *When Hell Was in Session,* 154.
[293] Mulligan, *The Hanoi Commitment*, 254.
[294] Collins, *Interview*, 134.

included solid proteins such as turkey, chicken, and other available meats, as Collins claimed, "they were trying to fatten us up."[295]

Why it Matters

During the Korean War, people from all sides of the battle were taken as POWs. Similar to the POWs in Vietnam, many prisoners faced torture and maltreatment, and there was a blatant disregard for the Geneva Conventions.[296] As the Korean War continued on, however, the treatment of POWs became vital to peace negotiations. In order for the war to come to an end, POWs in the Korean War would need to be returned to their home and given substantial reparations.[297] Only then would the U.S. withdraw its troops, and a peace agreement could be signed. A similar pattern can be seen in the Vietnam War, as after the death of Ho Chi Minh, the treatment improved significantly.

Regardless of military position, whether that be a pilot, medic, artillery, etc., all men were required to carry a box that contained C-rations. C-rations were essentially a lunch box for the military, containing one canned meat item, one canned fruit, a piece of bread or a desert item, one B-unit (crackers, cocoa, and a powder beverage), and coffee, cream, sugar, and salt.[298] Three of these C-ration meals provided approximately 3,600 calories for the day, making it fair to assume that the recommended caloric intake for soldiers during the Vietnam War was around 3,600 calories, give or take a hundred calories each way. When compared to the recommended caloric intake, what the POWs received in the camps was quite concerning.

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[295] Collins, *Interview*, 134.
[296] Laura Scott, "A Captive's Choice: The Korean Armistice Negotiations & the POW Issue, 1951–1953" (Master's Thesis, San Diego State University, 2025), SDSU University Library Digital Collections, 52.
[297] Scott, "A Captive's Choice," 53-54.
[298] "More Than Self. Living the Vietnam War." Atlanta History Center, May 4, 2022, https://www.atlantahistorycenter.com/exhibitions/more-than-self-living-the-vietnam-war/being-there/#:~:text=Each%20C%2Dration%20contained%20one,explosive%20to%20heat%20their%20meals.

It is difficult to determine the exact amount of calories POWs received on a daily basis, but based on the described meals from the firsthand accounts, I will approximate how many calories a day POWs were consuming. The bread most likely averaged around seventy to eighty calories; the meat, depending on how it was cooked, can range from about 150 calories to 300 calories; the pumpkin soup, that was most likely just mixed with water, contains thirty to seventy-five calories. If the highest possible calories are added together, the total calorie intake per meal would be around 530 calories. If this is multiplied by two, considering the average of two meals a day, the total caloric intake per day is about 1,060 calories, thus meaning the POWs were missing about 2,600 recommended calories a day. On this diet, POW McGrath recalls his weight loss saying, "I lost fifty pounds in the first three months of my captivity. Many others lost considerably more. It was not unusual for a man who was over six feet tall to weigh as little as 120 pounds."[299]

After 1969, POWs were allocated an extra meal in the morning of one to two slices of bread with some sugar, as well as bananas. Although this does not seem like a significant addition, based on a very loose estimation, the bread added 140 calories to the POWs diet, and the bananas added another 105 calories. Give or take a few calories, the POWs were receiving at the very least an additional 200 calories a day, which in this scenario, made all the difference in the world. Weight loss came, not only from the lack of calories, but also from the quality of the calories they consumed. As previously discussed, mice and other vermin would nibble on the food, as well as ants, cockroaches, and animal droppings, and because the POWs were so hungry, they would eat it anyway. This commonly resulted in diarrhea and/or dysentery, and, in extreme cases, added to their weight loss. Living in close proximity with human feces, breathing in the pathogens in the fecal matter or even eating it on foods, as seen with Risner, could also cause

[299] McGrath, *Prisoner of War,* 98.

diarrhea and other symptoms that lead to extreme weight loss. Ultimately, because Pham wanted to remove the Americans from Vietnamese soil, he made it a point to start feeding them better not only to kick start this process, but to also make it look like the POWs were being taken care of during the entirety of captivity.

The Shift in Medical Treatment

Prisoner of war Sam Johnson offered a unique perspective when it came to the death of Ho Chi Minh. Prior to Ho's death, the POWs were made aware that he was critically ill, and that, "All Vietnam's medical expertise is available to him."[300] Upon learning this, Johnson turned to one of the POWs in the cell next to him, and communicated that, "we know what North Vietnam's best medical care is all about."[301] In response, the man in the next cell, Shumaker, responded, "he's a dead man," further showing their lack of confidence in the North Vietnamese healthcare system.[302] Many POWs were uncertain of their fate if and when Ho died, but soon after his death, a camp commander told them that because Ho died, "the war will be over soon, but you will remain here. However, the leniency of the Vietnamese people will allow you some special privileges."[303]

One of these special privileges was enhanced medical treatment, and POW Captain Jim Mulligan first hand saw the treatment of POWs gradually improve. Living in such close quarters, it was easy to know when others were experiencing medical hardships, as the phrase "Bao Cao," literally meaning "to report," was yelled through the prison as a way to try and gain medical attention.[304] This plea for help was often ignored, until the death of Ho Chi Minh. Mulligan recalls the day he learned that Ho Chi Minh died, not as a sad one for the POWs, rather, a

[300] Johnson, *Captive Warriors,* 189.
[301] Johnson, *Captive Warriors,* 189.
[302] Johnson, *Captive Warriors,* 189.
[303] Johnson, *Captive Warriors,* 192.
[304] Mulligan, *The Hanoi Commitment*, 195.

worrisome one. The general thought among the POWs was, "I wonder what in hell is going to happen to all of us now that Ho is gone. Things can't be much worse than they are right now."[305]

External Wound Care After 1969

Mulligan could not anticipate the changes that were to come. For Mulligan, this meant receiving vitamins from his wife that could potentially keep him healthy in these dire conditions. Mulligan shared his vitamins with Ray Vohden, who still experienced difficulties with his legs, years after the numerous procedures. The vitamins sent by Mulligan's wife aided in clearing up the pus and ooze coming from his leg wound. Additionally, near the end of the war, POWs received vitamin and protein pills from the guards. This access to vitamin supplements and other medications increased substantially near the end of the war, and the pills were actually distributed to the POWs.[306]

Rather than having to beg for medical attention as they had done throughout their time in captivity, POWs' requests to be taken to the hospital were acknowledged, rather than willfully ignored. For example, Vohden requested another X-ray for his leg, and on this visit, doctors proposed a bone graft procedure. At this same doctor visit, Vohden asked if another POW back at camp could receive treatment for his battered ear.[307] Within a few days, POW Red McDaniel was given medicine for his ear. In the words of Vohden, "things were looking up."[308]

Along with the improving medical treatments for POWs, came more social interaction between them. Psychologically, this was positive, but it also increased the spread of disease and illness. Pink eye was an unfortunate result of letting POWs interact. As soon as pink eye began to spread around the camp, however, the guards did not remain passive the way they did under

[305] Mulligan, *The Hanoi Commitment*, 207.
[306] Vohden, *A Story of the Fifth Longest Held POW*, 414.
[307] Vohden, *A Story of the Fifth Longest Held POW*, 325-326.
[308] Vohden, *A Story of the Fifth Longest Held POW*, 326.

Ho Chi Minh's direction. Rather, they quickly instituted preventative measures, such as distributing eye drops to all POWs, whether or not they had been exposed.[309] Pink eye, being extremely infectious, made its way through most of the camp, but POWs recovered quickly with the use of eye drops. Based on the preventative actions of the camp guards and their attentiveness, this demonstrates another significant improvement.

Further improvements in medical care consisted of taking care of the pest problem in the prison camps. For example, some men that arrived from other camps to the Hanoi Hilton brought mites with them, which are known to cause rashes, severe itching, scabies, and demodicosis. Not only were the POWs now able to voice their complaints to the guards, but they did so without the risk of violence and torture. Rather than dismissing the POWs requests for help, the camp guard built a large fire to boil water which could be used to pour on the beds and prevent their attachment to others.[310] If this did not get rid of the mites, and the POWs refused to sleep on the beds, the guards were frustrated, but they did not force them to sleep on the mite-infested beds, and offered new mates.

Internal Would Care After 1969

The story of POW William Robinson, captured in 1965, serves as a perfect transition when it comes to examining the way medical conditions changed after the death of Ho Chi Minh. Although he was not treated for his initial injuries, injuries he obtained in the POW camp, or injuries he incurred due to unforeseen circumstances, he did need an emergency appendectomy in the fall of 1969. It was after the death of Ho Chi Minh, and Robinson "felt very fortunate that the one major health crisis of his seven and a half years in captivity occurred after the death of Ho Chi Minh."[311] At that time, the only way to get the attention of the guards for medical

[309] Vohden, *A Story of the Fifth Longest Held POW*, 384.
[310] Vohden, *A Story of the Fifth Longest Held POW*, 321.
[311] Robins, *The Longest Rescue*, 94.

attention was to stop eating meals, so that is exactly what Robinson did. After a few days of missed meals, the camp guards took Robinson from his cell and brought him to three different hospitals before finding one that was qualified to perform the procedure. It was not until arrival at the third hospital, that a Vietnamese doctor realized that Robinson's situation was critical. The doctor told Robinson, "if we don't operate, you don't live."[312] Robinson did not receive generalized anesthetics, but the local anesthetic that he was given, likely saved him a lot of pain.

During the operation, the doctors discovered that Robinson's kidney had also shut down, so a catheter was inserted after the procedure as well. For the next eight days, Robinson was able to remain in the hospital, where he was given real nutrition and a space to properly heal. Looking back at POWs such as Cherry, who underwent a rushed surgery outside of a proper hospital, and was returned immediately to his cell, Robinson had a much better experience overall. Given the conditions, Robinson took a few weeks to heal, in which he felt everything went back to normal, and upon his return to home to the United States, it was clear, "he suffered no long-term repercussions from the month-long ordeal."[313] In comparison to the way Risner was treated for his kidney problems before the death of Ho Chi Minh, Robinson's treatment seemed ideal. Given sufficient time to heal, and receiving nutritional food, are two more examples of improved medical assistance after the death of Ho Chi Minh.

Oral Hygiene After 1969

Ho's death also made it possible for a dentist to enter the prison grounds to treat the POWs dealing with oral issues. This service was optional for POWs. It is important to note that the dentist brought in was similar to the doctors seen, as neither had much experience in the procedures they were performing relative to western doctors and procedures. Someone with little

[312] Robins, *The Longest Rescue*, 96.
[313] Robins, *The Longest Rescue*, 98.

experience, however, was better than not having a dentist at all, so Vohden made sure to take advantage of this option.

During capture, Vohden's wisdom tooth became painful, and he understood that this might be his only opportunity to get it fixed. Vohden was hesitant, given his experiences with the North Vietnam medical community following his capture, but he showed the dentist which tooth bothered him, the dentist told him to open his mouth, and with pliers, he gave it, "one hell of a yank."[314] Although it hurt momentarily during the extraction, and was a little sore and bloody, Vohden recalled that the pain stopped almost immediately, and continued to progressively improve with time. Collins also remarked on the option of dental care after Ho's death, saying that, "there was more of an effort in the medical field of trying to take us to the dentist if we really had tough situations. I actually went to a downtown dentist that had normal, modern equipment…as opposed to that old gal that came in with a pumping wheel to grind out a tooth I had."[315]

Johnson also took advantage of the opportunity to see a dentist after having broken his tooth on foreign objects that were placed into the food provided to them. Similar to Vohden, Johnson was nervous to visit the dentist, as he was well aware that the medical care most of the POWs received created more problems rather than just fixing the one at hand. Although he decided not to receive care out of fear, the fact that he was given the option, shows the improvement in medical care for POWs.

Torture After 1969

Unlike medical care and good quality, which gradually improved after 1969, torture ceased completely, making it difficult to establish a clear 'before and after' dynamic. This

[314] Vohden, *A Story of the Fifth Longest Held POW*, 398.
[315] Collins, Interview, 120.

complete cessation, however, represents another positive shift in the treatment of POWs. After the death of Ho Chi Minh, Denton was caught communicating with fellow POWs. After being caught, Denton was escorted out of his cell by a guard who told him, "Denton, you have been caught communicating. You know what has happen before."[316] Denton was entirely prepared to face physical punishment in this moment, but instead, the guard said, "I am going to surprise! This time you will not be punish. We still have regulation and you have broken it, and I will criticize you for it. But as long as I am in authority, there will be no more punishment for communicating."[317] This small interaction demonstrates the immediate shift in treatment, and how torture was removed from the camps.

During the POWs time in the captivity, there was an officer, known as "the Cat," who managed the North Vietnamese torture program.[318] He bragged to the American POWs that, "he had extensive experience with French POW's, and was probably personally responsible for some deaths."[319] He was an extremely cruel man, and whenever POWs were pulled from their cells by him, they knew they were about to endure the more extreme torture sessions. Even following the death of Ho Chi Minh, POWs still lived in fear that the Cat would disregard any changes, and that he would continue pre-1969 torture practices. Denton was one of the first men pulled by the Cat after Ho's death, and to his surprise, the Cat sat him down and said, "I, other officers, and many of the guards had in our rage allowed ourselves to vent our anger on the prisoners and were responsible for deviations from our Vietnamese tradition of humane treatment."[320] With this statement from the Cat, Denton and the other POWs understood that genuine change was taking place in the camps, and their lives would no longer revolve around the fear of future torture

[316] Denton, *When Hell Was in Session,* 146. This is an intentional misspelling, as this is a quote directly from a guard.
[317] Denton, *When Hell Was in Session,* 146.
[318] I was unable to find the reasoning behind this North Vietnamese guard being called "the Cat."
[319] Denton, *When Hell Was in Session,* 68.
[320] Denton, *When Hell Was in Session,* 151.

sessions. It is important to note that while the beatings stopped, the interrogations continued. POWs were still pulled for propaganda purposes, but rather than being beaten or sent to solitary if they declined to answer any of the questions, empty threats were made by the guards, and they would be questioned again at a later time.

Conclusion

Some of the torture inflicted on the POWs, however, could not be undone. During torture sessions, prior to Ho's death, the guards would stick a, "dirty rag into your mouth with a rusty iron bar that would chip the teeth and tear the skin off the roof of the mouth."[321] In other instances, many men suffered ruptured ear drums, if they refused to answer questions. "The guards liked to slap the ears with a cupped palm," causing bleeding and in extreme cases, loss of hearing.[322] POW John McGrath suffered a severe, life-long injury in his arm as a result from torture:

[321] McGrath, *Prisoner of War,* 84.
[322] McGrath, *Prisoner of War,* 80.

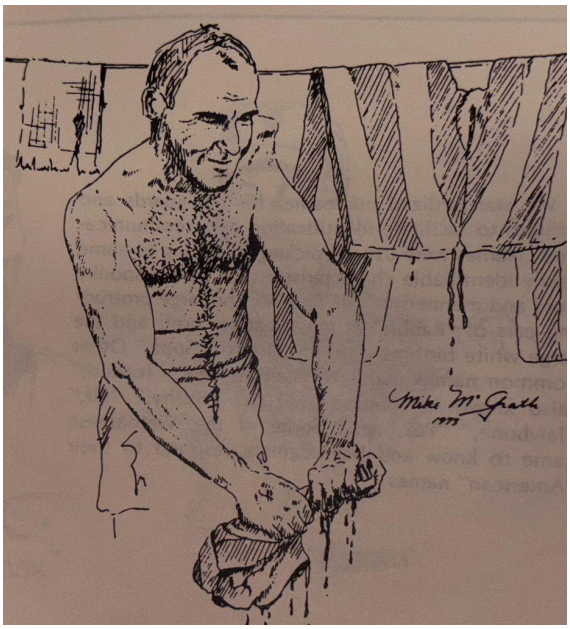

Figure 4.1: This photo was drawn by John McGrath after his release, in which he captions it, "the drawing of my arm is not a mistake. It is still dislocated and appears this way even today."[323]

Even after their release, memories and physical wounds remained with the POWs for the rest of their lives, and for those still living, they persist today. Even though the North Vietnamese signed the Geneva Conventions, legally agreeing to treat prisoners of war with respect, the agreement was ultimately not honored. Prisoners were humiliated, beaten, tortured, and some did not survive it to make it out to tell their story. Because of this, it is imperative to share the stories of those who returned and wanted to share their experiences, as well as those who are unable to do so on their own volition. In the majority of books written by a prisoner of war, Ron Storz and Ed Atterberry's names have been mentioned. Even though they lost their lives at the hands of the guards, their fellow POWs refused to let their voices fade.[324]

[323] McGrath, *Prisoner of War,* 56.
[324] It is important to mention that both Ed Atterberry and Ron Storz were awarded the Legion of Merit medal, the Air Force Cross Medal, and the Prisoner of War Medal, among a multitude of others for their service in Vietnam; Military Times, "Edwin Lee Atterberry," *Hall of Valor*, https://valor.militarytimes.com/recipient/recipient-3603/; Military Times, "Ronald Storz," *Hall of Valor*, https://valor.militarytimes.com/recipient/recipient-3445/.

Throughout their time as POWs, all men experienced mental and physical atrocities that most of us cannot comprehend, but it did not deter them from fighting for their survival. Many, through the strength of God, their wives, their children, and their company, fought every day as if tomorrow would be a new era, and they would be recognized under international law. Some waited a thousand days for humane treatment, while others were captured when the treatment had already improved. Although devastating to the North Vietnamese people, the death of Ho Chi Minh and the rise of Pham Van Dong in military affairs changed the lives of POWs in ways they had almost forgotten were possible.

Figure 4.2: Released Vietnam Prisoner of War Lieutenant Colonel Robert L Stirm being greeted by his family at a California Air Force base after returning from Vietnam, greeted by his family.[325]

[325] Sal Veder, *Released Vietnam prisoner of war Lt. Col. Robert L. Stirm is greeted by his family at a California Air Force base*, photograph, March 17, 1973, Associated Press.

Conclusion

In January of 1973, the North Vietnamese camp guards read the terms of the peace negotiations to the American prisoners. POWs were to be released and sent home within sixty days, in accordance with their date of capture. Airman Everett Alvarez would be the first of hundreds released. Prior to their discharge, the guards organized the POWs by year of capture, and informed them of the deaths of their fellow POWs, Ron Storz and Ed Atterbury. Further, they provided the POWs, "with big bundles of letters and a batch of pictures from home which they had been withholding for some years."[326]

Before being turned over to the United States, the POWs were provided with "going-home clothes," shoes, soap, and toothpaste. The POWs gathered in the main yard inside the New Guy Village facility, where they were lined up and escorted onto a bus that was headed toward the Hanoi airport. Traveling through the city for the first time without blindfolds, the POWs witnessed the horror and destruction the war caused on the town and the people. Even the Hanoi Airport, if you could call it that, was nothing more than a patch of dirt and rubble where the airport once stood. Boarding the plane, most POWs were in shock. It was a surreal moment. Some of the POWs had spent over 3,000 days as prisoners of the North Vietnamese, and now, it was finally over.

Their first stop was at a hospital after being placed into American custody, as was protocol. Some POWs, like Ray Vohden, were still suffering from wounds that never properly healed during their time in the camps, whereas others received a basic physical exam to assess their individual needs. Upon completion of the physical examinations, the POWs rushed to the hospital cafeteria, where they were given both high quantity and high quality foods. POW Jim Mulligan recalls, "I had forgotten what American food was like and was overwhelmed by the

[326] Mulligan, *The Hanoi Commitment*, 278.

choices available to me. I settled for steak and eggs, French fries and two half pints of milk. Then I had a piece of apple pie and vanilla ice cream for dessert."[327] POWs learned news about their families, and the pivotal events that had happened in their lives while they were locked up. The POWs reunion with their families was a beautiful and joyous moment in their release. Upon landing in Washington D.C., they were free to run to their wives, children, and other family members, where they experienced a glimpse of the lives they were denied, and could now reclaim.

Have We Learned Nothing?

In the twenty-first century, the United States has been involved in two major wars in the Middle East: the war in Afghanistan and the war in Iraq. Considering the centuries of U.S. military involvement in other countries, whether that be during World War I, World War II, Vietnam, or Korea, it would be reasonable to suggest that the U.S. has learned from previous war involvement. In the case of POWs, however, it seems as if the U.S. learned nothing from the hardships and life-altering actions that American POWs faced in North Vietnam.

In 1999, the Taliban and the terrorist group known as al-Qaeda rose to the surface in Afghanistan. These terrorist groups want to destroy American ideologies and Western Civilization. Their first major attack on Western ideologies was the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, laying the groundwork for the U.S. to take military action against al-Qaeda, and the country of Afghanistan. U.S. involvement in Afghanistan did not end until 2021, when the Biden Administration decided to pull U.S. troops out of what some call the United States' longest war. While the U.S. was in Afghanistan, there were reports detailing the mistreatment of Afghani detainees under the hands of American soldiers. Specifically, at the Bagram Airfield in Afghanistan, anonymous detainees claim that "they were beaten, deprived of sleep, and

[327] Mulligan, *The Hanoi Commitment*, 287.

threatened with dogs."[328] The Research Society of International Law has also documented anonymous accounts of detainees being, "kept in shackles, forced to stay awake for days, made to kneel in painful positions for long periods of time, beaten, and doused in freezing water," and pertaining permanent injuries at the hands of U.S. soldiers, all forms of treatment that are very similar to those faced by POWs in Vietnam.[329]

Similar treatment of detainees in Iraq also occurred. Following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, reports of abuse of prisoners in the Abu Ghraib Prison began to surface internationally, "uncovering graphic evidence of misconduct by U.S. military personnel."[330] The allegations against the used troops included "beatings, electric shocks, sleep deprivation, hooding, and prolonged forced standing and kneeling," all actions similar to those against American POWs in North Vietnam that go against the Geneva Conventions.[331]

Depending on who you ask, America's first military loss happened in Vietnam, after President Nixon removed our troops. This shifted the perception of the military across the country, enforcing the idea that the U.S. had no right to be there in the first place, and moving forward, we should not involve ourselves in international affairs that do not threaten our national security. Following the terrorist attack on September 11, the U.S. could not stand idly by as Western Civilization as a whole was being attacked. However, defending our country does not have to mean poor treatment of what the U.S. called detainees. Clearly, the experiences of

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[328] Muhammad Hassan Minhas, "The Pakistani Detainees of Bagram: Recourse under IHL," *RSIL Pakistan*, May 31, 2022, https://rsilpak.org/2022/the-pakistani-detainees-of-bagram-recourse-under-ihl/. Although I cannot say for certain, the people detained by American forces were considered "detainees" by some and POWs by others. If they were not considered POWs, this might have meant the U.S. did not have to follow the Geneva Conventions, the same way Ho Chi Minh tried to get around it by labeling U.S. troops as "war criminals."
[329] Minhas, "Pakistani Detainees of Bagram."
[330] Maddie Weissman, "Abu Ghraib Torture Scandal," *EBSCO Research Starters: Military History and Science*, 2022, https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/military-history-and-science/abu-ghraib-torture-scandal
[331] Amnesty International, *USA: Pattern of Brutality and Cruelty — War Crimes at Abu Ghraib*, May 7, 2004, https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/amr510772004en.pdf.

American POWs has not been discussed to the necessary extent, as the U.S. seems to be repeating patterns that devastated the lives of hundreds of American POWs.

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