Faith, Hope, and Torture: Music in the Prisoner-of-War Camps of North Vietnam

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FAITH, HOPE, AND TORTURE:
MUSIC IN THE PRISONER-OF-WAR CAMPS OF NORTH VIETNAM

by

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A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Music

The University of Memphis
May 2021
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To my father, Lt. Col. Cecil H. Brunson, USAF
Acknowledgments

I am honored that the former prisoners of war trusted me to tell their story. I am extremely grateful for each POW and family member who confided their intensely personal experiences and vulnerabilities. Their loyalty and strength consistently inspired me.

I would also like to extend my deepest gratitude to my advisor, mentor, and friend, Dr. Kenneth Kreitner, who encouraged me to pursue this degree, pushed me to be my best, and provided invaluable guidance throughout the process. I also appreciate my committee members, Janet Page, Albert Nguyen, Jeremy Tubbs, and Fred Albertson, for their support and helpful suggestions.

This dissertation would not have been possible without the love and support of my family. I cannot begin to express my thanks to my parents for their emotional and financial support, their motivation, and their tireless efforts to aid in my research. The endless proofreads and ingenious insights by my brother, Kevin Brunson, cannot be overestimated. And Daisy Brunson never left my side through the long nights of writing, unless she was lying on my shoulders. She comforted me when the subject matter became overwhelming.

I also wish to thank Graham and Isabelle Etzel for their encouragement and patience throughout the duration of this project. I am grateful for Terresa O’Leary, my biggest cheerleader, and all my friends and family who helped along the way.

Finally, I must thank God for leading me to this life-changing subject. While I was upset when a car wreck prevented me from researching in Italy, I never dreamed I would stumble upon a topic with the potential to change lives, including my own.
Preface

My father has always been my hero, though he would never accept that title. He was one of the less than six hundred men who survived North Vietnam’s infamous “Hanoi Hilton.” I have attended so many of his speeches that I could recite his spiel verbatim. I even wrote his speech for the traveling Vietnam Memorial Wall ceremony. I could tell you all about the terror and the bug-infested food. I thought I knew everything about his experience as a prisoner of war in Vietnam, but only recently did I think to ask him, “Did you have any music there?” I was astonished when he replied, “Yeah, I led the church services in my cell block.”

The next few days were filled with the discovery of long-buried memories. The night of his capture, as he sat in solitary confinement, near death from the brutal beatings, he summoned the energy and courage to whistle the “U.S. Air Force Song” and the “Tennessee Waltz” to identify himself to any nearby American prisoners. He was overjoyed when the man in the next cell whistled back with the “U.S. Navy Song” and “The Yellow Rose of Texas.” Music was his only form of communication for several weeks, as the men were “strictly forbidden from talking under strict punishment.”

When he was no longer isolated, he found that one of his cellmates played piano, while he played guitar. He explained, “So our bunk was just a board on some concrete blocks, so on one side of it we scratched a piano keyboard and on the other side we scratched a guitar with the frets on it. And we would practice making different chords and different things on our makeshift instruments.”

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As the war was nearing the end, a guard brought him an old beat-up guitar which he used to lead his cellmates in church services. He used lead rocks to write the words on their coarse toilet paper. The guitar he used is now on display at the “Hanoi Hilton” museum.

These discussions with my father piqued my interest and made me wonder if other POWs had similar experiences. I started reading the memoirs of other prisoners and realized they all had one thing in common – they all mentioned music. However, when I looked for any research on the subject, I realized that no one had ever written about music’s role in the prisoners’ lives.

With only seventy-five percent of the POWs remaining, the time to learn from them is short. Many of them are in their eighties. Through my father and the POW Network, I have connected to dozens of men who wanted to tell their stories. I have gained access to original music written by POWs on toilet paper and snuck out of the prisons – incredible songs that have never been published. These heroic men tell me they survived thanks to, or in spite of, music.
Abstract

North Vietnam’s cruel treatment of captured American pilots included music torture which rivaled the CIA’s program in Guantánamo Bay, but the aural persecution suffered for nearly a decade by the American prisoners of war has never been documented. Unlike other victims of music torture, the prisoners consistently turned to music as a healing, empowering, and unifying force, which raises several questions. Why did the POWs fare better than Guantánamo detainees? Can music reverse the trauma that music torture caused? How do we determine which music will cause harm and which music will heal?

Through numerous interviews with repatriated POWs and extensive research of memoirs, biographies, and military sources, I evaluate the damage caused by musical torture, the effectiveness of musical propaganda, and the ability of music to counteract the damage it caused. First, I show how faith (in God, country, family, and other prisoners) was key to survival, inspiring POWs to risk punishment and death for the chance to express their faith musically. Next, I demonstrate their incredible methods of creating, performing, and teaching music in hostile environments to keep hope alive. Finally, I examine the torture techniques utilized by the North Vietnamese, analyzing their music torture and propaganda programs to determine why their attempts at brainwashing failed and why the POWs suffered no long-term effects.

While certain music caused harm, most POWs thought music helped them survive. Music was essential for their mental health and unity, providing an outlet for frustration, a method of communication, and hope for the future. By reclaiming music for their own purposes, the POWs overcame the trauma of music torture.
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<td>American Forces Vietnam Network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIA</td>
<td>Central Intelligence Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO</td>
<td>Commanding Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DRV</td>
<td>Democratic Republic of Vietnam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FNG</td>
<td>Fucking New Guy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOG</td>
<td>Fucking Old Guy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GI</td>
<td>General Infantry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LBJ</td>
<td>Lyndon B. Johnson</td>
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<tr>
<td>LRAD</td>
<td>Long Range Acoustic Device</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LULUs</td>
<td>Legendary Union of Laotian Unfortunates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIA</td>
<td>Missing in Action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MiG</td>
<td>Mikoyan &amp; Gurevich (Russian aircraft designers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAM-POWs</td>
<td>Association of Former Vietnam Prisoners of War</td>
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<tr>
<td>NLF</td>
<td>National Liberation Front</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NVA</td>
<td>North Vietnamese Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NVN</td>
<td>North Vietnam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC</td>
<td>Peace Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>PLAF</td>
<td>Peoples Liberation Armed Forces</td>
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<td>POW</td>
<td>Prisoner of War</td>
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<tr>
<td>PSYOP</td>
<td>Psychological Operations</td>
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<td>PTSD</td>
<td>Posttraumatic Stress Disorder</td>
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<td>PW</td>
<td>Prisoner of War</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>RPOW</td>
<td>Repatriated Prisoner of War</td>
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<tr>
<td>SAM</td>
<td>Surface-to-Air Missile</td>
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<tr>
<td>SERE</td>
<td>Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape Course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRO</td>
<td>Senior Ranking Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USN</td>
<td>United States Navy</td>
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<tr>
<td>USAF</td>
<td>United States Air Force</td>
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<td>V</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
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<tr>
<td>VC</td>
<td>Viet Cong</td>
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<tr>
<td>VN</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
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<tr>
<td>VOA</td>
<td>Voice of America</td>
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<td>VOV</td>
<td>Voice of Vietnam</td>
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Chapter One

Introduction

There are many lessons that we all learned during our captivity, but the most important lesson for every countryman to learn and remember is that no matter how difficult, hopeless, or futile the situation might appear, a strong faith in God and country will somehow, in time, resolve that situation.

– Arthur N. Black, *We Came Home: P.O.W.s of Vietnam* \(^2\)

When the 591 American prisoners of war returned from Vietnam in 1973, the nation expected to see anger and hatred. Instead, each POW came off the plane thanking God and his country. \(^3\) These men had endured as many as nine years in dungeon-like cells, surviving on insects and sewer greens. Some had lived in solitary confinement for five years. Most had suffered extreme physical and mental torture. How could “God bless America” pour from their mouths after such a grueling experience?

“Faith” and “hope” are the answers they gave – faith in God and their country, faith in their families, faith in each other, and faith in themselves; hope that they would one day make it home. How did they express this faith and hope? When they found their faith and hope lacking, how did they rediscover them? They used music—to connect with God and each other, to transport themselves to happier places and times, and to maintain their sanity. Many of these men claim that music helped them survive.

Conversely, many of these same men claim that music made it harder to survive.

Long before the CIA tested their torture devices in Guantánamo Bay, \(^4\) the North

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Vietnamese government knew how music could affect their own people and their prisoners. Loudspeakers littered the countryside – the only electrical device in the tiny villages – and piped in propaganda night and day. These same loudspeakers were hung in each cell of the prison, tormenting the captured American soldiers. Painfully loud music drowned out the screams of men undergoing torture. Young children screeched out what the men described as discordant eastern music, leaving them nauseated. Hanoi Hannah, the propaganda DJ from the Voice of Vietnam, played songs from home that reminded them of everything they were missing. Men who broke under torture were forced to perform on the camp radio, adding to their shame.

Somehow the same force that made one prisoner fear for his sanity saved another from losing his. The power of music to alter the psyche is undeniable, but is it more likely to help or hurt? Does a positive or negative effect have longer lasting implications? Can music actually heal the trauma that music caused? If so, how do we determine which music will cause harm and which music will heal? The experiences of the Vietnam POWs provide a case study of the effectiveness of music torture, and the ability of music to counteract the damage it caused.

Hundreds of books have been written by and about the prisoners of war over the years, and while none of it, so far as I have seen, focuses specifically on the role of music in their captivity, almost every source I have read refers to music in one way or another. The POWs’ musical encounters varied, often encompassing their best or worse times.

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5 “And, when a man allows music to play upon him and to pour into his soul through the funnel of his ears those sweet and soft and melancholy airs of which we were just now speaking, and his whole life is passed in warbling and the delights of song; in the first stage of the process the passion or spirit which is in him is tempered like iron, and made useful, instead of brittle and useless. But, if he carries on the softening and soothing process, in the next stage he begins to melt and waste, until he has wasted away his spirit and cut out the sinews of his soul; and he becomes a feeble warrior.” Plato, Republic, trans. Allan Bloom (New York City: Basic Books, 1968), 411a-b.
Some men wrote of music’s saving power, while others lamented its painful effects. One major theme seen in the POWs’ memoirs is how their faith in God and the United States kept them going. Howard Rutledge wrote of his years in solitary confinement, and how singing hymns to himself was his saving grace.\(^6\) Charlie Plumb and Ralph Gaither told of singing in church services and the joy it brought them.\(^7\)

The POWs also used music to communicate, as recorded in a number of narratives.\(^8\) Singing, whistling, and tapping allowed the men to distribute important information and provide encouragement in an environment where talking was strictly forbidden. When these restrictions were lifted in later years, the POWs created music for entertainment and offered music education courses.\(^9\) Examples of unpublished, handwritten sheet music and teaching notes will be included below.

POW-created music was employed in worship, communication, and entertainment, but their captors’ music brought anguish. The North Vietnamese guards shrewdly chose specific songs to play on the loudspeakers hanging in each cell. A

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number of POW memoirs refers to the agony caused by the loudspeakers and their constant barrage of music and propaganda.¹⁰

Suzanne Cusick’s articles on music used as torture in Guantánamo Bay¹¹ brought this issue to the forefront of musicology in the early years of this century.¹² However,

¹⁰ Jeremiah Denton, When Hell was in Session: A Personal Story of Survival as a POW in North Vietnam (New York: Reader’s Digest Press, 1976); Robinson Risner, The Passing of the Night: My Seven Years as a Prisoner of the North Vietnamese (Duncanville, TX: World Wide Printing, 1999); Sam Johnson and Jan Winebrenner, Captive Warriors: A Vietnam POW’s Story (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1992).


there are no studies on the aural persecution suffered for nearly a decade by the American prisoners of war in Vietnam. My research on this topic consisted mostly of interviews with the POWs themselves.

For comprehensive information on the prisoner-of-war experience in Vietnam, see Rochester and Kiley’s *Honor Bound* and Hubbell’s *P.O.W.* In addition to those referenced above, I also recommend the memoirs of Everett Alvarez, Ernest Brace, George Day, Larry Guarino, and James Stockdale.

With hundreds of sources, each containing only tidbits of relevant information, a thorough review of literature is hardly possible or necessary, but the previous examples are a good sample of the experiences the POWs related through published memoirs, newspaper and magazine articles, and speeches. As a general rule, each narrative involving music falls into one of five categories: torture and propaganda, communication, church services and faith, entertainment, and education.

While the available literature provided a decent foundation for my study, the majority of my research consisted of interviewing the former prisoners of war. Through the POW Network (NAM-POWs), I connected with many men who were anxious to

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help. Some of the POWs sent essays they had previously written about the music in Vietnam, and others gladly volunteered information.

I interviewed more than thirty former POWs in person, on the phone, or through e-mail. The interviews began with the following questions:

1. What is your musical background?
2. Did you write any music while in prison?
3. Did you participate in any church services?
4. Did you sing while in solitary confinement?
5. Did you perform for the camp radio or any Vietnam-sponsored events?
6. Did you participate in or witness any musical entertainment?
7. Did you take part in any musical education (vocal or instrumental instruction, music appreciation courses, etc.)?
8. Did you obtain or fabricate any musical instruments?
9. Did you have a loudspeaker in your cell or within audible range?
10. Do you remember any of the music played over the speakers?
11. Did any of that music affect you, emotionally or otherwise?
12. If you hear those songs today, do they still have the same effect?
13. Did you ever communicate through music (whistling, singing, etc.)?
14. Did you use the tap code to communicate?
15. Did you ever recognize words in sounds that were not tapped?
16. Could you still use the tap code today?
17. Did you participate in or witness the Church Riot of 1971 in Camp Unity?
18. Did you celebrate Christmas with music?
19. Do you think music helped you survive (by providing emotional support, passing the time, or helping you connect with God or other prisoners, for example)?
20. Do you think music made it harder to survive (by causing homesickness, flooding your cell with propaganda, or blasting your ears with a dangerously high volume, for example)?

Many of these questions led to follow-up questions, usually asking for specific song titles or more details (see Appendix B and Appendix C).

Several POWs wrote music while in prison, and they were often surprised at how much they could recall. The most common form of writing was creating a parody of a song from their childhood or a piece of music played over the radio. I have transcribed a number of these songs for inclusion in this dissertation. A few accomplished musicians
composed their own music behind prison walls, and I have transcribed their handwritten sheet music as well.

The purpose of this project is to get a clear picture of music’s impact on the POWs of the infamous “Hanoi Hilton” and other camps in North Vietnam. It will explore the positive aspects of music in the prison camps to show how the POWs expressed their faith and found hope to survive through song. It will also evaluate the damage caused by musical torture and assess the effectiveness of musical propaganda. Finally, it will show how the healing properties of music, combined with the extraordinary unity of the prisoners, overcame the damaging effects of music torture.
Chapter Two

The Vietnam “War”

We didn’t go to Vietnam for the purpose of conquering North Vietnam. We didn’t begin this war; we haven’t begun any war in this century, as you know. That is the greatness of U.S. foreign policy. We make our mistakes, but we always have as our motives defending peace, not breaking it, defending freedom, not destroying it.

– President Richard Nixon

Entire libraries have been written about the Vietnam War, but it is critical to this study that the reader understands the U.S. never declared war on Vietnam. While this was a trivial discrepancy to most people at that time, it was the difference between life and death for the fighter pilots who were shot down and captured.

An understanding of the United States’ involvement in Vietnam requires a brief background of the Southeast Asia region. After a thousand years under the rule of Chinese warlords, the Vietnamese procured their independence in 939 CE. In the eighteenth century, French missionaries and traders trickled into the country, gradually bringing their culture, and finally, in 1885, their colonial occupation.

The Vietnamese launched a resistance in the 1930s, led by Nguyen Tat Thanh, a Marxist who founded the Indochinese Communist Party. History knows him by his nom de plume, Ho Chi Minh, which translates to “He Who Enlightens.” Japan’s bid for world domination during World War II included the occupation of Indochina which drove the French from northern Vietnam. When Japan surrendered, the door was open for Ho Chi Minh to step in, and he established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1945.


Through political indoctrination “Uncle Ho” won the support of the peasant class, but France continued to hold the south, which avoided Communist control. This led to the First Indochina War between the French and Việt Minh forces from 1946 to 1954. The French suffered a major defeat and agreed to retreat under the Geneva Accords, which promised to reunite Vietnam through elections in 1956. These elections never took place, however, as Ngô Đình Diệm declared himself president of the Republic of Vietnam (also known as South Vietnam) in 1955.

Both North and South Vietnam left many of their citizens disenfranchised. The Communist North instituted oppressive control over their people, leading almost a million North Vietnamese to seek asylum in the South by 1955. Loudspeakers inundated the countryside with propaganda, and dissidents faced indoctrination and reeducation classes. The South became a brutal and corrupt autocracy, leading those who opposed “Diemocracy” to band together as the National Liberation Front (NLF). Diệm dubbed these guerilla fighters the Viet Cong – short for Vietnamese Communists.

Back in the U.S., the Cold War loomed and defeating Communism became a top priority. With France no longer involved, the fate of Indochina rested on America’s shoulders. President Dwight D. Eisenhower compared the rise of Communism to falling dominos, suggesting that neighboring nations would quickly follow suit if Vietnam fell. Since the U.S. saw the conflict as the North attacking the South, the Americans either ignored or misperceived the political unrest in both.

3 Ibid, 6.
4 Ibid.
America’s early involvement in the region was merely training the South Vietnamese army to defend itself from its northern “bully.” The U.S. sent about a hundred military advisors over in 1955, gradually increasing this number over the next few years. President John F. Kennedy concluded that more military aid was necessary to ensure the South’s survival, and by the time of his assassination in November of 1963, over 16,000 U.S. soldiers were in Vietnam. That same month, a coup d’état led to the assassination of President Diệm as well.

President Lyndon B. Johnson took the office with an aggressive stance, saying “I am not going to lose Vietnam.” An incident between a U.S. destroyer and North Vietnamese torpedo boats in the Gulf of Tonkin in 1964 spurred an escalation in American involvement. Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, granting Johnson virtual free reign over the situation. Armed with the legal right “to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force, to assist any member or protocol state of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedom,” Johnson authorized the bombing of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong targets. As he switched to a more offensive tactic, he brought in ground troops numbering more than half a million by 1968. With riots at home and the threat of Soviet and Chinese intervention, Johnson abstained from a formal declaration of war.

While the U.S. government’s goal was to defend Indochina from Communism, the North Vietnamese and NLF (Viet Cong) saw the Americans as invaders standing in the way of the People’s revolution. They equated the U.S. with the French, assuming the

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“Imperialists” aimed to conquer in the name of capitalism. With no formal declaration of war, the American pilots who were shot down and captured in Vietnam were not considered prisoners of war; they were “air pirates.”

Life in a Hell Hole

You could look at this place and . . . just hear the screams of about fifty years, because it was – it is – a hard place.

– Ronald Bliss, Return with Honor

The Geneva Convention of 1949, which was ratified by the North Vietnamese, designated the appropriate treatment of a prisoner of war. The provisions include detainment in hygienic locations away from combat, sufficient food and medical treatment, allowances for religious practice, physical and mental exercise, and basic human respect. The Americans quickly learned that the rights granted to POWs would not apply to them. When Joe Kittinger refused to answer questions, his interrogator explained, “The Geneva Convention applies to military prisoners of war, which you are not. You are a Yankee pirate. You are a criminal and will be treated as a criminal. If you do not answer my questions you will die in this cell. Do you understand?” Larry Guarino received a similar message:

Your position here is and will always be that of a criminal. You are not now or ever going to be treated in accordance with the Geneva agreements, because this is an undeclared war. You have criminally attacked our people, and it has been decided that you are always to be treated as a criminal. You must cooperate and

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show repentance for your crimes to earn good treatment. Sooner or later, you are
going to show repentance. You are going to admit you are a criminal. You are
going to denounce your government. You are going to beg our people for
forgiveness.\footnote{11}

This viewpoint was the official policy of North Vietnam until Ho Chi Minh died in 1969.

While each POW faced his own unique challenges, the basic experience was
similar. What follows is a brief overview of that experience based on more than eighty
accounts, provided as background information for those with no prior knowledge. Certain
aspects will receive more focus later.

After ejecting from a burning plane at about 600 miles per hour, the fighter pilots
were often severely injured. They parachuted into hostile territory dodging bullets and
missiles, and were greeted by angry militiamen with guns and machetes. They were
stripped of their clothes and belongings and beaten mercilessly. Many of them never
made it out of the village alive.

Injured soldiers were trekked through the jungle toward the capital. Those who
were unfortunate enough to land in the south would be marching without shoes or proper
nutrition for months. While trying to survive off live frogs and bugs, many of them would
suffer from malaria and other ailments. Once these men reached Hanoi, most were taken
to the infamous “Hanoi Hilton.” The real name of this prison was Hoa Lo, which
translates roughly to “Hell Hole.”\footnote{12}

Most of the men started alone in a small cell similar to Figure 2.1, with some men
in solitary confinement more than five years. The beds, which were either concrete slabs

(accessed December 6, 2014).

\footnote{12} John M. McGrath, Prisoner of War: Six Years in Hanoi (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press,
or wooden planks, were fitted with shackles sized for the smaller stature of the Vietnamese (see fig. 2.2). American men would have their ankles cut to the bone as they spent weeks or even months in the shackles, forced to live in their own waste.

Figure 2.1. Solitary Prison Cell. Source: Pentagon Exhibit, OSD History Collection.

Figure 2.2. Ankle Shackles. Source: Giles Norrington. “Prisoners of War: Stolen Freedom,” anyveteran.org/pow (accessed May 21, 2018).
The provisions included in their stay were a straw mat to sleep on, a mosquito net, a threadbare blanket, and a metal cup. Their toilet was a rusty metal bucket. The windows were bricked up, leaving the men baking in the summer and freezing in the winter. They ate two meals a day, the first consisting of hot water and a piece of bread filled with bugs. The second would always feature some variation of soup, usually made with rotten pumpkin or sewer greens (the weeds that grew in the sewage pipes). The entrée was a small slab of raw pig skin with the hair still attached or a tiny fish complete with bones and eyes.

The men were forced to write “confessions” of their wrongdoings against the Vietnamese (see fig. 2.3). If they refused, they would be beaten with rifle butts or whipped with rubber hoses until their skin was completely torn from their bodies. Sleep deprivation was also common, keeping the men awake for weeks at a time (see fig. 2.4). If the prisoners still did not comply, which most of them considered treason, they would undergo unspeakable torture. The “rope trick” was one of North Vietnam’s favorite methods. The guards would tie their arms behind them and then pull them up until their shoulders popped out of their sockets. They would push down on their backs until they couldn’t breathe (see fig. 2.5). The worst offenders would be tied up by a meat hook which can still be seen at the Hanoi Hilton Museum. Many POWs lost the use of their hands after undergoing the rope trick. Most prayed for death as it happened. Every man who underwent this torture would break eventually.  


14 Wyatt, *We Came Home*, 5.
Figure 2.3. Written confessions were forced through the use of torture. *Source: John M. McGrath, Prisoner of War: Six Years in Hanoi* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1975), 45.

Figure 2.4. POWs were tied onto stools for days or weeks, then knocked down, doused with water, or beaten if they started to fall asleep. *Source: John M. McGrath, Prisoner of War: Six Years in Hanoi* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1975), 75.
A copy of the rules was hung in every cell, demanding “total submission” to the Vietnamese, and some POWs brought their copy home. The rules were posted as follows:

- The criminals are under an obligation to give full and clear written or oral answers to all questions raised by the camp authorities. All attempts and tricks intended to evade answering further questions and acts directed to opposition by refusing to answer any questions will be considered manifestations of obstinacy and antagonism which deserves strict punishment.
- The criminals must absolutely abide by and seriously obey all orders and instructions from Vietnamese officers and guards in the camp.
- The criminals must demonstrate a cautious and polite attitude the officers and guards in the camp and must render greetings when met by them in a manner already determined by the camp authorities. The criminal must carefully and neatly put on

Figure 2.5. The “Rope Trick.” Source: John M. McGrath, *Prisoner of War: Six Years in Hanoi* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1975), 79.
their clothes, stand attention, bow a greeting and await further orders. They may sit down only when permission is granted.

- The criminal must maintain silence in the detention rooms and not make any loud noises which can be heard outside. All schemes and attempts to gain information and achieve communication with the criminals living next door by intentionally talking loudly, tapping on walls or by other means will be strictly punished.

- The criminals are not allowed to bring into and keep in their rooms anything that has not been so approved by the camp authorities.

- The criminals must go to bed and arise in accordance with the orders signaled by the gong.

- During alerts the criminals must take shelter without delay, if no foxhole is available they must go under their beds and lay close to the wall.

- When a criminal gets sick he must report it to the guard who will notify the medical personnel. The medical personnel will come to see the sick and give him medicine or send him to the hospital if necessary.

- Any obstinacy or opposition, violation of the proceeding provisions, or any scheme or attempt to get out of the detention camp without permission are all punishable. On the other hand any criminal who strictly obeys the camp regulations and shows his true submission and repentance by his practical acts will be allowed to enjoy the humane treatment he deserves.

- Anyone so imbued with a sense of preventing violations and who reveals the identity of those who attempt to act in violation of the forgoing provisions will be properly
rewarded. However, if and [sic] criminal is aware of any violation and deliberately tries to cover it up, he will be strictly punished when this is discovered.\(^\text{15}\)

Mike McGrath suggests replacing the word “punished” with “tortured” to get a more accurate reading, calling the regulations “a weapon of terror, being in essence a thinly veiled excuse to torture the POWs.” Thanks to these rules, refusal to give up classified military secrets warranted punishment “up to and including death.”\(^\text{16}\) Still, revealing confidential details about their planes, missiles, and operations was unacceptable because, in the words of Bud Day, “it helped the enemy to kill your own classmates and friends.”\(^\text{17}\)

In addition to writing confessions and divulging information, the men were forced to participate in Vietnamese propaganda stunts and films. Guards would escort a few select men to a giant holiday feast (see fig. 2.6) or allow them to open packages from home, and the POWs would be greeted by flashes from hidden cameras.\(^\text{18}\) Staged church services and parties would be attended by camera crews from several Communist countries.\(^\text{19}\)

A special show camp, called the Plantation, was maintained with better facilities and treatment for a few lucky POWs, and these men were visited by dignitaries and

\(^{15}\) McGrath, *Six Years*, 113.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 111.

\(^{17}\) Day, *Return with Honor*, 155.


antiwar activists who would report on the “humane” conditions. The East German News Agency produced the film Pilots in Pajamas in this camp in 1967. As pilots turn their backs to the cameras, the narrator provides commentary:

This one here turned away as we came into his cell: he not only didn’t want to be questioned, but also not filmed. Was he filled with pride – or repentance? Did he refuse because of self-confidence or shame? We understand: The man is ashamed of himself…. Keep your mouth shut – this is their order. Will they adhere to this? If so, we would not learn – what’s going on in their brains, how they think, what they feel, how they became what they are: namely air pirates.


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Some POWs tried to send messages home through the propaganda films. Paul Galanti, seen in Figure 2.7, refused to be interviewed, so the film crew put him in a display cell with the words “Clean & Neat” painted on the wall behind him. To prove his presence there was not voluntary, Galanti extended his middle fingers. When Life Magazine printed his picture on the cover, they airbrushed out his fingers, and Galanti’s nephew thought “the Vietnamese had cut off Uncle Paul’s middle fingers.”


Many POWs were tortured until they agreed to interviews with the press, but some of them devised methods to covertly pass information during the process. Dick Stratton was told to bow before a room full of cameras. He explains, “When they put me out there I played the Manchurian candidate trying to pretend that I was drugged or brainwashed and bowed ninety degrees, bowed to the audience, and then I bowed to the head table.”23 The photo of his deep bow with glazed eyes plastered the news internationally, leading the U.S. to suspect the possibility of brainwashing.24

![Figure 2.8. Richard Stratton bows at a press conference. Source: Lee Lockwood, “North Vietnam Under Siege,” Life, April 7, 1967.](image)


Jeremiah Denton also received renown after a press conference in which he blinked “TORTURE” in Morse code.\textsuperscript{25} James Stockdale prevented the Vietnamese from using him by shaving off the middle of his scalp in a “reverse Mohawk.” When the guards decided to cover the damage with a hat, he proceeded to beat his own face in with a 50-pound stool.\textsuperscript{26} Nels Tanner foiled the VN’s propaganda efforts when the guards forced him to name pilots from his ship who refused to fight in the war. He gave them the names Clark Kent, the alias of Superman, and Ben Casey, a TV character.\textsuperscript{27} His captors were so pleased with the information that they published his statement worldwide. Unfortunately, \textit{Time} magazine lauded the efforts of this “artful dodger,” and he paid for the ruse for years to come.\textsuperscript{28} In fact, Denton, Stockdale, and Tanner were all members of the Alcatraz Gang – eleven POWs who suffered in the worst punishment camp for their resistance efforts.

\textbf{The Hanoi March}

I hope this doesn’t sound too presumptuous, but after last night, I think I almost—up to a point—know how Christ must have felt.

– Bob Purcell, \textit{Beyond Survival}\textsuperscript{29}

One particular night, July 6, 1966, lives on in the memories of the POWs as a time of terror. Vietnamese citizens sought revenge for recent air raids near the capital, and the prisoners were easy targets. Since they had all confessed to war crimes during

\textsuperscript{25} Townley, \textit{Defiant}, 76.


\textsuperscript{28} “Hanoi’s Pavlovics,” \textit{Time}, April 14, 1967, 43.

\textsuperscript{29} Coffee, \textit{Beyond Survival}, 166.
their torture sessions, Ho Chi Minh was threatening trials and executions. Fifty POWs were gathered from camps around the city and taken downtown for a public display. Handcuffed in pairs, the men were lined up on the street eight feet apart, as seen in Figure 2.9.


A “boisterous, jeering mass of Hanoi citizenry” lined the road ahead.30 As the plan unfolded, one man joked, “A parade! A parade! Oh boy, I love a parade!”31 Another POW grasped the gravity of the situation, remarking “Well, the Christians are here. Where are the lions?”32

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31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.
As recalled by Bob Shumaker and others, the chief guard, nicknamed Rabbit by the Americans, advised the prisoners:

You must remember that you are all criminals and that tonight you are being taken to your public interrogations so that all the world will know your terrible crimes... Today you will see the fury and hatred of the Vietnamese people. They will try to kill you. We cannot protect you. Show proper attitude for your crimes. If you repent, you will see our lenient and humane treatment. If not, the people will decide what to do with you.  

Then Rabbit ordered the men to “bow [their] heads in shame for [their] crimes.”

Jeremiah Denton countered this order, however, reminding the men, “You are Americans! Keep your heads up.” The Americans stood tall in defiance, so their guard escorts employed rifle butts to lower their heads.

As the men began to march toward the angry crowd, a truck full of cameras hit them with spotlights, leaving the targets highly visible in the darkness. Party officials were scattered along the two-mile route with bullhorns to rile up the onlookers. They tailored their chants to the particular prisoners walking by, shouting things in English like “Alvarez, Alvarez, son of a bitch, son of a bitch!”

A mob numbering tens of thousands greeted the POWs with seething hatred that words could not convey. The horde began to hurl rocks, bottles, and other projectiles at the prisoners’ heads, often knocking them off their feet. Once the guards gave up on holding them back, the mob resorted to pummeling the prisoners with their fists and kicking them in the legs and groin. The pairs took turns lifting each other up, and many

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33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 102.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 103.
finally resorted to crawling. Everett Alvarez wrote, “We stumbled and staggered through the gauntlet for perhaps an hour. . . . Fearful and terrorized, I wondered how much longer this could endure. Soon we would drop from exhaustion and succumb like weary prey to snapping wild dogs.”

The Hanoi March backfired on the Vietnamese. The propaganda stunt that was intended to show the people calmly jeering the war criminals instead showed shackled prisoners fighting for their lives. Nineteen antiwar U.S. senators, including Eugene McCarthy and George McGovern, quickly denounced the march and promised the destruction of Vietnam if the threatened trials took place. Within weeks, Ho Chi Minh announced there would be no trials.

Write Hanoi

What caused the change in treatment of the POW’s after Ho Chi Minh’s death in 1969? The change was because of the requests from the families of the prisoners and because we have to pay attention to public opinion.

– Ambassador Huynh Anh Dzung, Tales of Southeast Asia

The first years of captivity were marked by systematic torture, isolation, and starvation. The harsh conditions of the so-called “Extortion Era” continued from 1964 until the fall of 1969, ending with the death of Ho Chi Minh in September. Several factors led to improved circumstances for the prisoners.

37 Alvarez and Pitch, Chained Eagle, 148.
38 Rochester, Honor Bound, 200-201.
41 Hirsch, Two Souls Indivisible, 36.
In August of 1969, the Vietnamese decided to send three POWs home as part of a propaganda event. Their press release states the purpose of the liberation:

[To show the] humanitarian and lenient policy of the Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and as an illustration set forth for the American people’s movement against the U.S. war of aggression in Vietnam, the General Political Department of the Vietnam People’s Army has decided to release three American military men captured in North Vietnam: Wesley Lewis Rumble, Robert Franchot Frishman, and Douglas Brent Hegdahl.42

An antiwar delegation from the U.S. traveled to Hanoi to pick up the men amid plenty of media fanfare. When asked about their treatment, the POWs were reserved, mentioning only that they had received adequate food and shelter.43

Once the men reached the safety of their homeland, two of them opened up about their experiences.44 The third, Capt. Wesley Rumble was medically evacuated in a body cast with a broken back.45 Lt. Robert Frishman and Seaman Douglas Hegdahl held a press conference in which they described the cruelty they had endured. Frishman had been seriously injured, so the Vietnamese doctors removed his elbow and tied his muscles together, leaving his arm completely useless.46 Prior to this medical treatment, the Vietnamese told him he would “die in four hours” unless he talked. He was only


46 Stockstill, “Prisoners of War.”
taken to the hospital after he passed out from blood loss. “Then, even with my bad arm, they tied me up with ropes,” he recalled.⁴⁷

Information garnered from Frishman and Hegdahl was combined with the stories of lonely wives waiting for years to know if their husbands are dead or alive and pictures of POWs, emaciated and injured, in Louis Stockstill’s article “Prisoners of War: The Forgotten Americans of the Vietnam War,” published in the *Air Force Magazine* in October of 1969. The editors prefaced the article by saying it was “one of the most important articles ever published in this magazine.”⁴⁸ Stockstill provided graphic detail of the maltreatment U.S. POWs endured:

Prisoners are fed little but rice, and many suffer from malnutrition. Some are afflicted with intestinal parasites. Except when allowed out to empty toilet pails, prisoners are confined in huts, often locked in wooden foot blocks or handcuffs. Barbaric treatment is not unusual. In Hanoi’s prisons, men have been kept in a pitch-black room for more than a year, hung from ceilings by their arms, tied with ropes until they developed infected scars, and burned with cigarettes. At least one has had his fingernails ripped from his hands. The broken bones of another, set by communist doctors and still in casts, were rebroken by guards.⁴⁹

He then recounted the press conference of Frishman and Hegdahl, writing “The two Navy men were ashen. Their eyes were deep, hollow circles of darker gray, much like the exaggerated eyes of starving children. . . . Their tightly stretched, almost translucent skin had a corpse-like pallor.”⁵⁰

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⁴⁷ Ibid.
⁴⁸ Ibid.
⁴⁹ Ibid.
⁵⁰ Ibid.
The article was published the next month in Reader’s Digest\textsuperscript{51} and was reprinted for distribution about 800,000 times after that.\textsuperscript{52} The American public was outraged, and Stockstill’s suggestion of a letter-writing campaign to Hanoi was a huge success. The Red Cross picked up on the idea and named the campaign “Write Hanoi.”\textsuperscript{53} They distributed over six million brochures titled “5 Minutes and 25 Cents,” which encouraged citizens that they had the power to save a POW’s life.\textsuperscript{54} The Hanoi post office was soon drowning in millions of postcards from all over the world demanding better treatment for the POWs.\textsuperscript{55}

North Vietnam was shocked to find that Americans, even those opposed to the war, were concerned with the fate of such few men.\textsuperscript{56} With the recent death of Ho Chi Minh and the sway of negative world opinion, Vietnam refined its policies regarding the POWs. Ronald Lebert noted, “Treatment improved somewhat in late 1969 and I felt it was due to the aroused and angered public in the United States and the many letters written on our behalf.”\textsuperscript{57} Robert Barnett added, “I feel certain the pressure from the good people in the United States led to our improved treatment in October 1969.”\textsuperscript{58}


\textsuperscript{53} Townley, Defiant, 300.

\textsuperscript{54} American Red Cross, “Summary of Red Cross Action on Behalf of U.S. Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia,” September 11, 1972.

\textsuperscript{55} Loosbrock, “Public Opinion,” 6.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{57} Wyatt, We Came Home, 318.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 41.
sustenance was still lacking, the constant barrage of torture and high frequency of solitary confinement both ended that autumn.

The Prison Camp Shuffle

The VC kept moving prisoners around to the various complexes in an attempt to break up the communications system.

Eugene McDaniel, Before Honor

American POWs thrived in large part due to their organizational structure. Every camp kept track of the prisoners within, and determined the senior ranking officer (SRO) of each camp and cellblock. The SRO would issue orders to the men below him, providing instruction and encouragement. During torture sieges in which each man was put through the ropes to force confessions or information, the SRO would dictate exactly how far the sufferer was expected to go. Mike McGrath wrote,

After years of discussion, and communication between camps, cells, etc. our senior officers made common sense policy decisions which were designed to preserve our lives and well being. One of the main policies promulgated was along the line, ‘If tortured, do your best to stick to n,r,sn, dob [sic] per the C of C. If forced to go beyond that, give the minimum possible. Bounce back as soon as you are able, and return to a position of n,r,sn, and dob. Do not risk your life or your health.’

Numerous POWs credit these directives with saving their lives. This subject will be covered in more detail in later chapters.

With so many POWs in solitary confinement throughout the years, and with silence strictly enforced, communication was a complicated ordeal. Regardless of the torture they knew it would bring, the Americans showed their ingenuity as they

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60 “…name, rank, serial number, and date of birth per the Code of Conduct.”

surreptitiously foiled their captors and managed to communicate. The captives made sure that every new resident was “on the line” as soon as possible after he arrived. Notes were written on toilet paper, underneath bowls, in the latrines, and in the torture rooms which taught the men how to use the tap code. By tapping through the walls, sweeping with brooms, and even coughing to other prisoners in certain combinations, the men could efficiently “talk” to each other without opening their mouths.

Tapping is a monotonal system, rendering the Morse code ineffective. They had no way to represent the dash.\textsuperscript{62} Therefore, the tap code is based on a 5x5 matrix encompassing the alphabet, minus the letter “K” (see fig. 2.10). The first tap indicates the row, and the second tap indicates the column. Tap-pause-tap represents an “A,” while tap-pause-tap-tap represents a “B.” After years of practice, the POWs could tap faster than they could talk. Cmdr. Edward Martin noted, “Toward the end, each night when the lights went out, it sounded like an office full of typewriters.”\textsuperscript{63}

The Vietnamese eventually learned the tap code by retrieving it through torture, so the men constantly came up with new ways to confuse those who were listening. They abbreviated everything to the point where a native English speaker could not have deciphered it. “‘Roger’ meant ‘I understand’ and was abbreviated RR. The word for interrogation was ‘quiz’ and was transmitted as QZ.”\textsuperscript{64} James Stockdale wrote,

Sam and I would sign off before dark with abbreviations like GN (goodnight) and GBU (God bless you). Passing on abbreviations like conundrums got to be a kind of game. What would ST mean right after GN? Sleep tight, of course. And


DLTBBB? I laughed to think what our friends back home would think of us two old fighter pilots standing at a wall, checking for shadows under the door, pecking out a final message for the day with our fingernails: “Don’t let the bedbugs bite.”

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Figure 2.10. The Tap Code Matrix.

The Vietnamese thought that moving the “troublemakers” (those who actively communicated) away from each other would stop the problem. The POWs were shuffled among the many different camps, seemingly at random. North Vietnam’s attempt to hinder communication actually allowed it to flow between camps, allowing the men to learn the identity of all captives throughout North Vietnam.

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65 Stockdale, *In Love & War*, 186.

Prisons were scattered throughout North and South Vietnam, Laos, and China, with the majority concentrated around Hanoi. The camps outside of North Vietnam were generally makeshift habitats deep in the jungle or swamp. Guerilla bands of Viet Cong would hold the POWs in bamboo cages with thatch roofs, as seen in Figure 2.11. The dangers of their primitive lodgings were mainly environmental, with monsoons, leeches, wild animals ready to strike at any time.\(^{66}\) Instead of walls, they were surrounded by minefields, punji stakes, and impenetrable undergrowth.\(^ {67}\) Still, a few POWs managed to escape from captivity. The southern camps almost exclusively held enlisted Army and Marine soldiers.\(^ {68}\) According to the Air Force, one-third of the Americans held by the

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\(^{67}\) Ibid., 115.

Viet Cong “died from disease, injury, or by execution.” Many of these men are still considered missing in action.

The northern camps were mostly filled with Air Force, Navy, and Marine pilots. Their experience differed greatly from those captured in the south, although about one hundred men were moved from the south to the northern camps. The Vietnamese usually started their new captives at Hoa Lo (Hanoi Hilton) in an area nicknamed New Guy Village (see fig. 2.12). Bud Day told about his experience there:

The idea was to take a POW who probably was injured during his ejection, who may have sustained wounds from the local militia after he was shot down, who was exhausted and confused by the arduous nighttime travel and apprehensive about his future and immediately subject him to torture. It was a sound and effective method of interrogation designed to break the spirit and force a “surrender” and then a “confession” of his crimes. Many a fighter pilot found that in the space of a half hour he was crying and screaming, pissing all over himself, and pleading for mercy.

Those who didn’t break during their initial torture were often moved to another section of the Hilton, called Heartbreak Hotel (see fig. 2.13). This area was likened to a “frigid cement bunker,” full of rats and rat feces, prompting Gerald Coffee to tell a newcomer, “You’ll see why it’s called Heartbreak.” Some POWs spent years in solitary confinement in Heartbreak Hotel, while others were moved to another section of the Hilton, nicknamed Las Vegas or Little Vegas.

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72 Coffee, Beyond Survival, 100.
Vegas was opened due to overcrowding, but it was constructed with a purpose. Mike McGrath called it “the result of a tremendous effort on the part of the Vietnamese to keep the Americans isolated from each other. Large 60’ x 24’ rooms were subdivided into eight 7’ x 9’ rooms in a maze-like arrangement and prevented easy communication.”73 Howard Rutledge added, “They left a two-foot dead space between the cells so that prisoners could no longer share a common wall. We just continued

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tapping on the floor or common perimeter wall, and all their extra work didn’t ever slow us down.”


Dave Hatcher is credited with naming Little Vegas, and he labelled each cellblock a specific casino; e.g., Stardust, Desert Inn, Thunderbird, Golden Nugget, and Riviera. The Mint was a maximum-security cellblock with three tiny cells, only 6’x3’ with a

74 Rutledge, In the Presence of Mine Enemies, 49.

75 Townley, Defiant, 144.
hardwood bed taking up two feet of that width (see fig. 2.14). Every cell in Little Vegas had beds fitted with leg shackles.\textsuperscript{76}


In addition to the Hanoi Hilton, North Vietnam housed a large number of POW camps, as seen in Figure 2.15. These camps were not all active at the same time, and many men would live in five or more different locations during their time in captivity. The names listed on this map are those given by the POWs themselves, and the Vietnamese name is not available for all of them.

\textsuperscript{76} Rutledge, \textit{In the Presence of Mine Enemies}, 48-49.

The other camps located in Hanoi were the Plantation (the show camp) and Alcatraz. The latter was the harshest punishment camp, reserved for the eleven worst offenders who spent two years cut off from the rest of the POW population and each
other. The closet-sized cells were partially underground and allowed no ventilation.\textsuperscript{77} The men were guarded constantly, and conditions were so grim that one member of the Alcatraz Gang, Ron Storz, did not survive his time there.\textsuperscript{78}

The Hanoi Power Plant was also used to house POWs for a few months in the summer of 1967. The prisoners named this camp Dirty Bird because it was blanketed in black dust. The Vietnamese kept POWs here to discourage the U.S. from bombing it, but an escape led to its closing, and earned the two escapees time in Alcatraz.\textsuperscript{79}

Another camp used consistently throughout the war was Cu Loc, located in a suburb of Hanoi (see fig. 2.16). The prisoners named it the Zoo, because “it’s the first kind of place where the animals come to look at the people!”\textsuperscript{80} An abandoned French art colony, the Zoo had once been a colonial community focused on filmmaking. The dilapidated buildings now housed livestock, and the swimming pool in the center was dubbed Lake Fester. Though the cesspool was filled with trash and sewage, the guards grew fish in it for food.\textsuperscript{81} The various buildings were named according to a farm motif; e.g., Stable, Pigsty, and Barn.

The Zoo was opened a year after the first prisoner was captured in an attempt to foil the elaborate communications system at the Hanoi Hilton. Windows were bricked up, walls were built, and prisoners were shuffled from one camp to another. Eugene

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\begin{itemize}
    \item[78] Rutledge, \textit{In the Presence of Mine Enemies}, 63.
    \item[79] Ibid., 58.
    \item[80] Alvarez, \textit{Chained Eagle}, 129.
    \item[81] Townley, \textit{Defiant}, 62.
\end{itemize}
McDaniel wrote, “The seventeen moves I made during my six years were motivated by the same intent. The VC thought that, being surrounded by new men, some of whom did not have the code, and in a less conducive environment, we would be kept in isolation.”


Briarpatch, a primitive camp with no electricity, was used from 1965 through 1967. Being farther away from the capital, food was scarce and the prisoners suffered from severe malnutrition. The guards at Briarpatch were cruel, dragging prisoners around the camp by nooses.  

Two punishment camps were opened in 1968 to the southwest of Hanoi. Farnsworth housed many officers in tiny black cells with no windows. Ted Guy was there in 1970 and he recalled, “I lived in a cage with 250 rats – I made a game out of naming them. Word hadn’t filtered down to that camp that treatment was to improve.”

83 Rochester, Honor Bound, 211.
84 “Return with Honor,” PBS Online.
85 Wyatt, We Came Home, 230.
Skid Row was one long building of 6’x4’ cells. The “fetid mud hole” had no electricity, ventilation, or bathing. The prisoners banished to Skid Row were called Hell’s Angels by their comrades.86

The Dan Hoi prison, northwest of Hanoi, was nicknamed Camp Faith. This camp had several compounds and held over 200 prisoners in larger cells. Water pipes connected the compounds, allowing the men to tap messages a quarter of a mile away. The prisoners enjoyed relative freedom as they were able to congregate outside for a couple hours a day.87

Son Tay, also known as Camp Hope, held up to seventy prisoners in 1968-1970. It is best known as the site of a failed rescue attempt. The U.S. gathered intelligence on the camp and prepared an elaborate raid, but the military was unaware that the well had run dry and the Vietnamese had relocated the prisoners to another prison nearby, so the Americans were able to see and hear the raid from a distance.88

The Son Tay raid panicked the Vietnamese, who quickly moved the POWs from any outlying camps back to the Hanoi Hilton. With the sudden influx of hundreds of men, the Vietnamese were forced to open up a new section of the prison. Large cells were filled with up to fifty men, leaving each man no more than nineteen inches of space, but the POWs were thrilled to be reunited with old friends.89 With their newfound ability to communicate face-to-face, the men celebrated their new home, naming it Camp Unity.

86 Coram, American Patriot, 236.
87 McDaniel, Before Honor, 139-40.
88 Townley, Defiant, 304.
89 Armand J. Myers et al., Vietnam POW Camp Histories and Studies, Volume I (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air War College, 1974), 380-82.
As more pilots were shot down and captured, other facilities were reopened and new camps were added. Mountain Camp and Rockpile were added far from the capital in 1971. Over 200 men were moved to Dogpatch, a camp near the Chinese border, when hostilities began to threaten the capital in 1972. Even though the men had companionship in these camps, they still continued to live in squalor (see fig. 2.17).

The conditions in every POW camp of North Vietnam were far below the standards demanded by the Geneva Convention. Living in extreme temperatures with little food, surrounded by rodents and bugs, the POWs’ bodies were filled with parasites and disease. They lived in constant fear of their next torture session, and had no contact with their families for years. Still, the most difficult part of captivity for many was the “suffocating monotony.” Sitting in a concrete box, staring at the same wall day after day with no end in sight was painful for men with brilliant minds. Remaining motionless was unnatural for those who flew at break-neck speeds. The next few chapters will explore the ways these prisoners used music to adapt and thrive in their new environments.

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91 Risner, *The Passing of the Night*, i.
PART I

FAITH
Chapter Three

Faith in God and Country

Faith in God, our President and the American people, plus the leadership, spirit and companionship of my fellow POWs helped sustain me during imprisonment. I prayed for strength to overcome injuries and to resist – my prayers were answered. I prayed for our President and his efforts to secure a peace agreement and the return of all POWs – again my prayers were answered. I looked to my fellow POWs to help me through periods of pain, anxiety and depression – I was never let down.

– John C. Ensch, *We Came Home*

The POWs came home to instant celebrity status. Interview requests poured in, and books and articles about their experiences flooded the market. Everyone wanted to know what they had been through and how they had survived. *We Came Home* features a profile of each POW answering these questions. While their experiences differed greatly, their survival methods were nearly identical. By my count, more than ninety percent of them attributed their survival to “faith,” “hope,” and “confidence.”

Many journalists found the similarity in their responses suspicious, assuming that the government had indoctrinated the men. The POWs insist this was not the case. Gary Anderson wrote:

I have been asked many times in many states why we as POWs are expressing patriotism, faith in God and country. Were we not coached in our comments to the public in this regard? No, of course not. We were, however, imbued with a greater appreciation of our country and its people.

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3 Ibid., 23.
A number of the men commented on a newfound appreciation for their country after seeing how the Vietnamese lived, and some even mentioned they felt sorry for their captors who had never experienced freedom.

While most POWs used the word “faith” in their interviews, they did not refer to spiritual faith alone. Gerald Coffee explained the four kinds of faith he practiced:

Faith in myself to simply do what I needed to do to pursue my duty…. Faith in myself to survive that experience and to obey the American Fighting Man’s Code of Conduct…. Faith in myself to be wily enough, to be tricky enough, to be resourceful enough to minimize my value to the enemy. The second aspect of faith is faith in one another, faith in the men around me, faith in my fellow POWs, faith in my family at home. The third aspect of faith is faith in my country, America. Faith in our basic institutions. Faith in our cause there in Southeast Asia. The fourth aspect of faith is faith in my God, probably the foundation for the faith by which I survived.4

Henry Barrows reiterated the importance of faith in his comrades, “What has had the greatest effect on me is the lesson of man’s fellowship in times of anguish. We had to live together and comfort each other, and we did.”5 Hector Acosta expressed his “awe at the strength of the character, brotherhood, courage, and loyalty of the men with whom [he] was interred and those who had suffered the rigors of years of detention, who maintained the flame of courage and love of country as an inspiration to [them] all.”6

Alan Brunstrom added, “I can honestly say I have never known a finer group of men. I

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5 Wyatt, We Came Home, 43.

6 Ibid., 13.
am extremely proud of all of them. We did many things to help each other through our
darkest hours, but the thing that was most helpful was our faith.”

These quotes might give the impression that the POWs were almost saintly, but
they admit they were typical young fighter pilots before they were captured. Howard
Rutledge explained:

Don’t misunderstand. We weren’t two fully-developed saints sitting
dispassionately through the day discussing theology. There probably wasn’t a
thimbleful of serious theology between us. We just knew that without our faith in
God, without our common belief that He was with us, we could not have made it
through.

For many, their self-confidence had bordered on arrogance and they believed they were
invincible. Barry Bridger explained how imprisonment altered their attitudes:

We all probably thought that success in life was how fast you could run the 100
yard dash, how quickly you could be promoted…but when you were actually cast
into the encroaching environment of a POW prison camp you began to focus very
rapidly on ideas that were more meaningful, which is your faith, family, and
friends, and doing something worth remembering.

Religion was a major factor in the survival of most POWs, but many men entered
the prison as atheists, and some came out the same way. Others found religion while
imprisoned and credit this with their survival. Cecil Brunson said, “You’ve heard that
there are no atheists in foxholes, well, that goes for POW camps too.” Jim Warner joked
that one of his cellmates “carried this to a ridiculous extreme” when he claimed he got

7 Ibid., 87.

8 Howard Rutledge and Phyllis Rutledge, In the Presence of Mine Enemies (Old Tappan, NJ:

9 Larkin Spivey, Battlefields and Blessings: Stories of Faith and Courage from the Vietnam War

10 Laura Coleman Noeth, “News of POWs Captivates Ex-guest of Hanoi Hilton,” Commercial
Appeal (Memphis), April 22, 2003.
converted during a torture session. When asked which religion he converted to, the man said, “all of them.”

Some nonreligious POWs found themselves calling on God during their worst torture sessions, if only in hope that someone would hear. Robert Barnett wrote, “I had not been very religious and perhaps am still not in the classic sense, but God came into my life and sustained me.” Allen Brady called himself “not a deeply religious man,” but admitted that “in times of great stress, [he] called upon Him for strength, and found it.”

Kenneth Coskey called himself “semi-agnostic,” but he prayed “because of desperation, just sheer desperation, and the loneliness and fear of these interrogations.” He said, “I don’t know who I was asking. I was asking God. I don’t know the motivation. I had nobody else to talk to, nobody to turn to.” Edwin Shuman was also drawn to prayer during incarceration. He said, “I can’t analyze it. I know that I don’t believe in the mechanics of the religion any more now than I did before but I just had to have something to lean on. I couldn’t do it by myself.”

Richard Stratton wrote:

The people I had contact with in the prison system were made up of believers and non-believers, atheists, agnostics, deists, Christians and animists. Some had an awakening, others a conversion, many a return to the faith of their childhood and some were just too busy keeping soul and body together to analyze the condition of either.

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12 Wyatt, We Came Home, 41.
13 Ibid., 72.
15 Ibid., 150.
The majority of religious prisoners were Protestants, but other religions were represented as well. Lynn Beens wrote that his experience brought him closer to his Mormon religion.  

Howard Dunn felt that “faith in a Heavenly Being” helped him survive.  

Michael Burns thought “a subtle, distant conviction of the existence of our ‘Source,’ that almighty ‘Love-Energy’ that created all and is a part of all, was overwhelming and good.”

Several lapsed Christians wrote of their revival during incarceration. John Anderson said his “faith was restored” when he saw the “extreme faith” of the older prisoners. William Angus wrote, “In my loneliness and despair I re-met God, and only His presence can be credited with the uplifting of my spirit and soul at this most critical juncture in my life.” Kenneth Fraser was sustained by knowing he was not alone. He wrote:

When I first regained consciousness in Hanoi, I was in a cell by myself, but I was not alone. On the wall above the door, someone had scratched a cross. God was with me. The one who left the cross was with me. Before I was shot down I was not a deeply religious person, but during my captivity, I became closer to God.

He was not the only prisoner to find courage in that cross. David Everett wrote, “I well remember my painful first night in Hanoi and finding a cross in the plaster wall of my

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17 Ibid., 52.
18 Ibid., 165.
19 Ibid., 91.
20 Ibid., 24.
21 Ibid., 26.
22 Ibid., 198.
cell. Certainly the crude reminder lifted my hope, and religion was a fundamental component of what sustained me in the days that followed."^{23}

Richard Stratton was a devout Catholic. He noted that “what the survivors did have in common was growing up in a nurturing family system, neighborhood, school and church with a deep appreciation of what it meant to be a free American.”^{24} While a sense of humor and loyalty helped, he found that faith was the constant that gave them strength:

As I observed my peers, I was reinforced in my belief that those who had a religious faith had AN ACE IN THE HOLE. Others, without Faith, drew on hidden wellsprings of strength from somewhere in their background or military code of ethics. Those with Faith never had to search. There always was the bedrock of Faith to fall back on, take off from and provide limitless sustenance.^{25}

He added that “love for one’s comrades, one’s country, and one’s family… prevented the enemy from stealing their minds and destroying their bodies.”^{26}

Jim Stockdale was both a Christian and a philosopher with a brilliant mind and classical education. His studies of Epictetus allowed him to blend his faith with a practice of Stoicism to survive the long years of isolation and torture. Stockdale compartmentalized his mind into those “things he could control” and those things “beyond his power.” He disciplined his mind to “control his attitude, his opinions, his goal, and his actions.”^{27} When he asked if he was angry about the years he lost, he replied, “Not at all. I felt as though I was exactly where I belonged. I never wavered in

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^{23} Ibid., 181.

^{24} Stratton, “Ace in the Hole.”

^{25} Ibid.

^{26} Ibid.

my absolute faith that not only would I prevail, but I would prevail by turning prison into
the defining event of my life and that it would make me a stronger and better person."

When a prisoner began to lose faith, his survival odds would drop drastically.29
Men with seemingly healthy bodies would lose morale and give up, dying because the
spark of life had gone out. Whenever possible, other POWs would step in and attempt to
pull their colleague out of hopelessness. Albert Carlson experienced this despair when he
was locked in wooden cages in the jungle while suffering from malaria, beri-beri, and
severe wounds. He wrote, “Initially, death seemed inevitable, and I feared it…. I felt
sorry for myself. My condition deteriorated. I questioned God and asked if He was not
failing me.” Carlson was saved when a fellow POW “broke the mandatory camp silence
to say a prayer for [him].” He determined he was failing God and the other prisoners, so
he renewed his faith and found both his morale and his physical health improved.30

When prayer and encouragement were not enough to lift a POW out of darkness,
the men tried another approach. Joe Kittinger heard that a prisoner in the next room had
withdrawn from the group and stopped eating. As a senior officer, he gave the man a
direct order to prevent further deterioration. He told him:

I’m ordering you, as of this moment, to start eating the food you’re given and to
start taking part in activities with the other POWs in your room. If you do not
obey this order, I am hereby informing you that I will have your ass court-
martialed when we return to active duty upon our release.31

30 Wyatt, We Came Home, 105.
31 Joe Kittinger and Craig Ryan, Come Up and Get Me: An Autobiography of Colonel Joe
Kittinger (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010), 178-79.
By the next day, the despondent POW had returned to his healthy mental state. Kittinger noted that sometimes a direct order was the only effective motivator, saying “we were still soldiers, and our survival as a group depended on our working together.”

The camaraderie shared by the POWs went far beyond teamwork, however. Many POWs wrote of withstanding torture longer than they imagined possible because as soon as they broke, someone else would take their place. These men would “willingly absorb physical punishment rather than let it fall to their friends.” James Stockdale surmised that “the more intense the common danger, the quicker the natural selfishness melts.”

After years of bearing this burden together, he thought, “Most of us were thinking of that faceless friend next door, that sole contact with our civilization, that lovely complicated imaginative human thing we had never seen, in terms of ‘love’ in the highest sense.”

Knowing that they would have to report back to their superiors was a major motivator in holding out during interrogations as well. Bob Craner admitted, “The thing that kept my endurance up, that kept me conscientious, was my obligation to the other guys, the people I was serving with, because I was reasonably aware of the lengths they were going to, and I was just trying to keep up with them.” Thomas Kirk agreed, “There’s an element of fear in it, an element of fear of your fellow man, your fellow

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32 Ibid., 179.

33 Wyatt, We Came Home, 77.


35 Ibid.

36 Rowan, They Wouldn’t Let Us Die, 47.
American. It’s keeping faith with him, and the fact that you’ve got to face this guy. And tremendous strength derives therefrom.”

Richard Stratton added that when they heard the keys go past their cell, they did not feel relieved that the guard had targeted someone else. He said, “Every night we said a prayer for the guy, whoever he was, who was in Room 18 after a raid. We prayed for that guy because we knew the hell he was going through. Another guy was taken out of his cell and you just started praying for him.”

Whether the POWs had faith in God, America, their families, their fellow prisoners, or themselves, they agreed that faith played a role in their survival. During their debriefings upon release, there was “a spontaneous outpouring from the POWs themselves, often insisting on the right to tell of the role which religion played in their individual and collective lives.” The military took note of religion’s significance to the POWs and conducted research on the phenomenon. One study showed that 61% of POWs reported “favorable significant mental changes” from their experience – double that of the DOD control group. Subjects cited prioritization of family and religion as examples of those changes.

37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., 65.
40 Ibid.
The chaplains at Clark Air Force Base, the first stop for the released prisoners, recounted the “great emotional intensity” of the POWs as they described their religious experiences. When a chaplain acknowledged that God helped the men to get through their imprisonment, a POW countered, “No, Chaplain, that’s not it. I’m not saying that he merely helped me; I’m saying that without God I simply would not have been able to survive or make it.”42 Another POW testified, “I earnestly believe that without faith in God that I would have lapsed into insanity.”43 These statements were not uncommon.

**Faith Like a Child**

We lived on faith – perhaps a blind faith – but a deep, personal faith that maintained our trust in God, in our country, and in our families and fellow Americans. The basis of this faith goes back to my grammar school days…. Our military training helped to polish this attitude, but the basis of our strength was our childlike faith in all the things that make America what it is.

George Coker, *We Came Home* 44

In solitary confinement, the POWs faced many trials which led them to despair: torture, starvation, sleep deprivation, isolation, illnesses, and more. When they reached their lowest points, especially during intense torture sessions or weeks of forced wakefulness, they found their mental grip on reality begin to slip. Several confessed that they forgot the names of their children or how many children they even had during these periods.45 Relying on their family’s love was not an option in these circumstances. Their


44 Wyatt, *We Came Home*, 126.

military training and the entirety of their knowledge were inaccessible. Many POWs found their only solace came from a childlike faith expressed through prayer and music. George Coker proclaimed, “The thing that got us through was the things that we learned before we were ten years old.”

“Bible verses on paper aren’t one iota as useful as Scripture burned into your mind and heart where you can draw on them for guidance and comfort.” This was the important lesson that James Ray learned during his time in Vietnam. The POWs had no access to religious material in prison, even though hundreds of Bibles were shipped to them over the years. When Mary McCarthy visited the Hanoi Hilton, she asked Robbie Risner what he missed the most. He told her what he most desired was a Bible. Shocked by the revelation that the prisoners were denied this item essential to their faith, she asked the head guard if she could send Bibles for everyone. He told her “that would cause problems” and “put her off.”

Joe Kittinger relayed an instance when a guard asked if he wanted something to read. When he said he wanted a Bible, the guard replied, “That’s what all you American criminals want. Why is that?” Kittinger realized, “There was no way he could ever understand.” Norm McDaniel caught a glimpse of Vietnam’s paranoia when an

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48 Robinson Risner, The Passing of the Night: My Seven Years as a Prisoner of the North Vietnamese (Duncanville, TX: World Wide Printing, 1999), 162-63.

49 Kittinger, Come Up and Get Me, 156.
interrogator admitted Bibles were banned “because there was hidden meaning in it” that
the officials could not understand.\(^\text{50}\) Without access to scripture, hymnals, or sermons, the
POWs had to rely on their memories.

Howard Rutledge described the harsh reality of his time alone:

It’s hard to describe what solitary confinement can do to unnerve and defeat a
man. You quickly tire of standing up or sitting down, sleeping or being awake…. What sustains a man in prison is something that he has going for him inside his
heart and head – something that happened… back in childhood in the home and
church and school. Nobody can teach you to survive the brutality of being alone.
At first you panic. You want to cry out. You fight back waves of fear. You want
to die, to confess, to do anything to get out of that ever-shrinking world.\(^\text{51}\)

Some prisoners found comfort in believing Jesus was their cellmate, and some
even claimed to see or hear Christ.\(^\text{52}\) Lawrence Guarino met Jesus shortly after his
shootdown, standing “five or six stories tall.” He maintained, “I’m telling you, I saw Him
standing there!”\(^\text{53}\) Ralph Gaither told of a religious encounter during a dark moment
when he attempted to bargain with God for any relief. As he made promises of future
good deeds, Gaither heard the words of “Amazing Grace” in his head and realized God
was already there:

And then he came, and it wasn’t in a ball of fire. It wasn’t a voice or an angel. It
was nothing like that. My life changed, and I felt the change in my mind. I knew it
without any question of a doubt. I knew the Lord was with me and that he would
watch over me from that point on.\(^\text{54}\)


\(^{51}\) Rutledge, *In the Presence*, 32.

\(^{52}\) James Dotson, “Documentary Traces Faith of POWs,” *Baptist Standard*, June 5, 2000,

\(^{53}\) Wyatt, *We Came Home*, 224.

Jeremiah Denton had a similar experience as his cell was filled with another POW’s tortured screams. He said, “This is going to sound kooky I guess, but I heard a voice in my cell when I was nearing despair and saying to the Lord I’m not sure I can go on comporting myself in an honorable fashion.” A soothing voice suddenly drowned out the screaming, telling Denton to “say sacred heart of Jesus, I give myself to you.” He knew the phrase from his childhood but had learned it with “thee” instead of “you.” Denton explained, “I knew where it was coming from.” This led to his spiritual awakening.55

Bob Flynn, the lone American imprisoned in China, recalled hearing “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear” being sung by angels for ten days at the end of two unbearable months. With his arms constantly locked behind him in pressure cuffs, he lay in his own waste and writhed in pain. He believed the music was a miracle, not a memory. When his captors came and ordered him to denounce America, he instead told them about God. Flynn said the Communists all began to cry and his cuffs were removed.56

Several POWs wrote about their sudden ability to recall scriptures and songs they had learned as children. Sam Johnson explained, “I was amazed at what the mind could retain and reclaim after years of storage. I remembered Bible stories from Sunday school. Songs and verses I hadn’t heard since grade school came back to me with perfect clarity.”57 Gaither struggled to remember one song that nagged at him, but after four


57 Sam Johnson and Jan Winebrenner, Captive Warriors: A Vietnam POW’s Story (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1992), 138.
years it popped in his head, “The Love of God.” He wrote, “It is amazing how much a message like that can mean. I almost think God fed some of the songs to me at a proper time to mean the most.”

Charlie Plumb spent his first three months in prison disciplining his mind to recall every Bible verse he had ever memorized and every song he had ever sung in choir. He remembered at least one verse of 72 different hymns. Dick Stratton practiced his Roman Catholic faith by recalling all of the standard Mass hymns along with the High Mass and Solemn High Mass selections. Jay Hess also found that “remembering the words and music of church hymns was uplifting and a positive way to spend time.” He had his own theme song, “It May Not Be on the Mountain Height,” which he sang softly to himself. Mo Baker defiantly sang as “often and as loud as [he] wanted, since [he] was already doing time in solitary.” He also “mentally organized the score of Handel’s Hallelujah Chorus,” because he had learned all four parts in school. He said, “The task occupied me for a week, filling many dull hours in a dark, dank, stone cell.”

Numerous POWs regretted that they had not memorized hymns before their capture. After his release, Don Heiliger regularly warned children to “memorize certain things that are going to get you through because you’re going to come with a crisis in

59 Charles Plumb, e-mail message to author, February 25, 2016.
60 Dick Stratton, e-mail message to author, August 28, 2015.
61 Jay Hess, e-mail message to author, September 11, 2015.
63 Mo Baker, e-mail message to author, September 16, 2015.
your life and, if you don’t have it, you commit suicide… because you don’t have something right then to grab onto.”

Heiliger was thankful that he had been forced to memorize a hymn every week as a child because “they all came back.”

These songs were treasured among the POWs and shared in any way possible with other cells. Verses and lyrics were painstakingly tapped through the walls so that others could draw strength from them. The men would scratch the words into the floor with rocks or write them on “that sandpaper-like stuff that passed for toilet paper” with homemade ink produced from brick dust or diarrhea pills. Gaither boasted, “Those Bibles were pretty accurate, too. Though not always word for word, and though we did not always get every verse in order, the basic content was there. Immediately upon hearing a new verse, or a song, or a poem, we committed it to memory.”

A daily routine helped break up the monotony of years alone, and for many prisoners, scripture and music filled large blocks in their schedule. One POW recalled saying the Lord’s Prayer 700 times in a single day. Jerry Coffee celebrated Mass daily, saving a bite of rice or bread for communion, and repeatedly recited the Rosary.

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64 Donald L. Heiliger, interview by James McIntosh, 1999, interview OH293, transcript, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, Madison, WI, 61.

65 Ibid.


67 Ibid.

68 Hartsell, Just a Closer Walk, 16.

Coker and Dan Maslowski both crafted a “makeshift rosary” from whatever materials they could find.\(^{70}\)

Howard Rutledge published his memoirs as a novel for adults and a comic book for children. He wrote that singing hymns daily kept him sane during his five years in solitary confinement:

> I spent the morning pacing the cell in three steps, then turning around and pacing back again-back and forth every morning, humming quietly every hymn I knew, repeating the words, verse by verse in my mind. I had arranged the songs in groups of five. I would wind up each group with a prayer…. I would quote through my Scriptures or pick a word and try to develop that word into another hymn or Scripture buried deep in my memory, waiting to be discovered.\(^{71}\)

Rutledge eventually recalled 120 hymns, and he sang each one every day, as his comic book illustrates (see fig. 3.1). He reminded his readers, “All this talk of Scripture and hymns may seem boring to some, but it was the way we conquered our enemy and overcame the power of death around us.”\(^{72}\) Other men in his situation had allowed the enemy to crush their spirits, lying down and dying. Rutledge was adamant that hymns and prayer carried him through those difficult times.

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\(^{71}\) Rutledge, In the Presence of Mine Enemies, 62.

\(^{72}\) Ibid., 37.
Many POWs were bolstered by singing, humming, or thinking of religious songs. Bob Flynn sang every day, finding strength in “Santa Lucia” and his other favorite songs from his Catholic church.\(^{73}\) Sam Johnson declared, “In these days of utter desperation, God transformed my awful cell into a shrine of worship. I began to regain my courage, and with it came renewed determination to resist the enemy.”\(^{74}\) Norm McDaniel claimed that “such songs as ‘Amazing Grace,’ ‘What a Friend We Have in Jesus,’ ‘He’s My Friend,’ ‘When I’ve Gone the Last Mile of the Way,’ and ‘We’ve Come This Far by Faith,’ along with many others, were sources of immediate strength and inspiration when the pressures of interrogations and pain from torture were weighing heavily on [him].”\(^{75}\)

When a man is completely isolated for extended periods of time, he must find ways to cope. By far, the most successful coping method for the American soldiers


\(^{74}\) Johnson, \textit{Captive Warriors}, 139.

\(^{75}\) McDaniel, \textit{Yet Another Voice}, 81.
imprisoned in North Vietnam was communion with God through prayer, meditation on scripture, and singing. The next chapter will explore how the prisoners conducted group church services from their individual cells.
Chapter Four

**Solitary Church Services**

We’d all kneel down together—even though we were by ourselves—and pray. And the strength of prayer with a group, as you know, is much stronger than just by yourselves.

— Sam Johnson, *Prisoners of Hope*

Singing alone in a tiny room is hardly a church service, but the extreme loneliness and dread experienced by those living in a torture camp require the captives to unify by any means possible. During the early years of the Vietnam War (1964-70), the POWs were often separated from their colleagues and forced to live in silence. Still, they managed to communicate with each other through many covert methods, such as the tap code, hidden notes, and sign language. One of the first messages sent to newcomers related to church services, proving the high priority of these events.

Charlie Plumb recalled his first communication in solitary confinement, where Bob Shumaker had fashioned a wire between the cells that could be tugged in coded patterns. Shumaker told him, “Church call is five coughs.” Plumb asked, “Do we all go to church together?” When he received a positive reply, he rejoiced at the thought of gathering with his fellow soldiers to sing hymns in the courtyard. But Sunday came and he heard five coughs outside his vent. He wrote, “It suddenly dawned on me that this church call meant that each of us was to begin his worship alone.”

After the initial disappointment, Plumb realized the importance of praying together.

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Larry Chesley explained, “We were all aware of the words of Jesus, ‘Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.’ He was indeed with us in these little services. To others, each of us might have seemed alone, but to us the separating walls were insignificant for those few minutes on Sunday. We were together in spirit.” Ralph Gaither added, “Those church services and Bible verses and songs and poems meant more than I can express in words. They gave strength for the days which passed by under constant threat of torture or punishment.” Knowing that another American was on the other side of that wall singing the same song gave the POWs the power of solidarity.

Norm McDaniel believed, “In spite of the restrictions of the captors, we were able to worship together in a sense, even though we were not in the physical presence of each other, and the realization that other prisoners were lifting their voices to heaven simultaneously with me added vitality and a further sense of communion to my worship.” Everett Alvarez remembered singing “The Star-Spangled Banner” on his first day at the Briarpatch. Fifteen prisoners, each in a separate hut, joined in unison, bringing him to tears. He wrote, “It was a momentous day in my life, standing there once more among fellow Americans. Though far from home, wretched, tired, hungry, disheveled, unwashed, and caged, we were solidly united as one.”

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3 Larry Chesley, *Seven Years in Hanoi: A POW Tells His Story* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, Inc., 1973), 21.


Through both scheduled church services and spontaneous bouts of song, the POWs supported each other. Robbie Risner shared how he was practicing Morse code by tapping out the 23rd Psalm when Ed Davis in the next cell tapped out, “Say it again.”7 Jerry Coffee noted that hearing Risner whistle “Yankee Doodle” gave him “almost a euphoric sense of relief that [he] truly wasn’t alone.”8 Danny Glenn was similarly lifted up when he heard someone whistling the Marine Corps hymn. He stated, “Well, of course, we weren’t supposed to make any noise that could be heard outside the room in the early days, and we usually didn’t.”9 The fact that another prisoner was willing to risk torture in order to display his American pride made the song much more valuable.

To those who doubted the importance of these solitary church services, Jeremiah Denton avowed, “Those not subjected to the prisoner-of-war experience may have trouble understanding how real was the presence of God to most of us…. Christians of all denominations lost old prejudices and found brotherhood; Christians and Jews were reconciled, and most of us lived with the awareness of God’s love.”10 Ralph Galati added, “It was important because we needed it mentally and emotionally.”11

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7 Robinson Risner, *The Passing of the Night: My Seven Years as a Prisoner of the North Vietnamese* (Duncanville, TX: World Wide Printing, 1999), 183.


11 Ralph Galati, telephone interview by author, September 5, 2014.
This is not to suggest that every POW practiced a religion. For many, the “church” services were more of a patriotic hour, meant to unite the men in those beliefs they all shared; e.g., freedom and honor. Edward Hubbard clarified,

For all the people who were religious, it had an obvious meaning. For every single American who was there, religious or otherwise, it was the one time each week when every single man was rowing the boat in exactly the same direction at the same time. The strength we derived from that unity of effort was absolutely awesome. That’s what we held on to.¹²

In fact, many POWs began relying on each other more than God or their country, after years of a seeming failure of either to secure their release. Norm McDaniel explained,

During the first years nearly all participated in worship services and stated or demonstrated dependence on God. But as the years wore on and we languished there, a few of the men openly expressed doubt of God’s compassion and goodness, and some ceased to participate in the worship services. Their reasoning was that they had been praying for deliverance from prison for years and nothing had happened.¹³

Despite McDaniel’s observations, all but one of the ex-POWs interviewed for this project claimed that the church services were very important to them.

**Church Call**

Church in prison is probably a little different than anything you have been to before. There, it made no difference what religion you were or if you had any religion at all. Somewhere around 10:00 a.m. on Sunday morning, whether you lived by yourself or with 100 people, we stopped what we were doing and sat down and honored church call at the same time and essentially in the same way.

-- Edward Hubbard, *Escape from the Box*¹⁴

Although the methods of signaling church call and the content of the service varied, these solitary church services were conducted in every building of every camp.


¹⁴ Hubbard, *Escape from the Box*, 66.
POWs in the Zoo who had never communicated with those in the Hanoi Hilton, for example, somehow came up with the same ideas. At the time, the importance of faith and conducting church services were not included in survival training for the U.S. military.

So how did these men decide to practice ritualized worship? Sam Johnson said, “On Sunday we scratched a mark into the wall — the end of one week in prison, the beginning of another. It seemed right somehow to pray together on that day.”15 As Christians who had spent every Sunday in church prior to capture, Johnson and the men around him were simply continuing a long-standing practice.

Ralph Gaither unknowingly started a religious trend by whistling “The Lord’s Prayer” on a Sunday. As he whistled, an armed guard started running towards his cell.

Gaither recalled,

I obviously was caught, but I moved to the other side of my room and stopped whistling. But the whistling continued. Other men, whom I had not heard because all of us were in perfect unison, kept the tune going. The guard was confused. He could not be certain who was breaking the rule of silence and who was not – and so he could not stop the whistling.16

Whistling “The Lord’s Prayer” became the signal for church call in Gaither’s cellblock, and the tradition continued every Sunday.

While some cellblocks started a worship program spontaneously, others were organized or even ordered by the senior ranking officers (SRO). Robbie Risner established SRO policies in the Hanoi Hilton in October of 1965 which included, “Hold church services each Sunday, signal to begin is ‘God Bless America’ being whistled.”17

15 Sam Johnson and Jan Winebrenner, Captive Warriors: A Vietnam POW’s Story (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1992), 99.

16 Gaither, With God in a P.O.W. Camp, 42.

“Risner’s Rules,” as they were called, also instructed the POWs to “once each day, face the east and pledge allegiance to the flag of the U.S.” and “before going to bed at night, say the 23rd Psalm.”

Initiating the services through whistling was not always possible, so the prisoners had to get creative. Norm McDaniel explained,

Because the camp authority forbade us at that time to hold church services, it was necessary for us to proceed in a clandestine fashion. Each Sunday when the guards were not too close, the senior ranking officer or some other designated person would initiate a signal for church call, which consisted of five bumps on the adjacent wall, followed by a pause and a single bump. The signal was repeated three times, and after allowing sufficient time for the call to be passed to all the occupied cells in the building, the occupants of each cell would conduct their own service in a quiet manner so as not to attract the camp personnel’s attention.

This may seem like a lot of work considering the outcome was still worshipping in silence and alone, but McDaniel declared, “Upon completion of each session, I felt much more relieved if I had been apprehensive, comforted if lonely, and rejuvenated when feeling depressed.”

As mentioned earlier, the procedure for church call differed depending on the location and the SRO. Charlie Plumb’s camp devoted half an hour to prayer every day at the 6:30 AM gong. When Larry Chesley lived in the Zoo, everyone in his building would daily recite the 23rd Psalm and ask a blessing over their first meal.

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20 Ibid., 25.

21 Plumb, *I’m No Hero*, 84.

22 Chesley, *Seven Years*, 21.
Most camps held church services on Sundays, partly because this was the typical day for church back home, and partly because the guards were laxer on this day. The prisoners would clear for each other, making it possible to communicate quietly through the walls. The most commonly tapped signals were “CC,” which stood for “Church Call,” and “VV,” which stood for “Victory in Vietnam.” Mo Baker reported that his camp’s SRO faked a loud sneeze to begin the church service, and would end the service an hour later with another false sneeze.24

The Church of America

We always finished our church service in prison by singing “God Bless America.” We sang it rather quietly in those days because the last thing we needed to do was to get into any more trouble. You might be amazed at how it makes you feel. You might feel a chill up your spine or a lump in your throat. That, ladies and gentlemen, is pride in being an American.

– Edward Hubbard, *Escape from the Box*25

Regardless of how and when the service was initiated, everyone would participate, and everyone would express their devotion to their country. Patriotism played at least an equal part in the services, while religion sometimes took a back seat. Since national pride was a common denominator among all the prisoners, those cells may have seemed more like a “Church of America” rather than a church dedicated to God. Of course, many patriotic songs and oaths include references and petitions to God, but the U.S.A. gets the glory.

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24 Mo Baker, e-mail to author, September 16, 2015.

25 Hubbard, *Escape from the Box*, 84.
Jerry Driscoll’s camp would stand at the signal and say the Lord’s Prayer, then they would turn to the east at a second signal and say the Pledge of Allegiance. Everett Alvarez recalled how the first was recited “with one low voice, hushed and barely audible but proud and declarative,” while the second was “said with defiant vigor.” He reminisced, “This was a glorious moment of bonding…. The Pledge represented all that united us and everything that we cherished. It was the indissoluble glue of our shared culture.”

George Hall’s service would start with Jeremiah Denton whistling “God Bless America,” but also consisted of the Lord’s Prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance. After reciting these together, the POWs would continue separately with any hymns they knew. Other POWs listed the 23rd Psalm, the Apostles’ Creed, and select scripture as texts that were whispered in unison.

Quincy Collins recollected that his SRO would appoint a man to give a testimony, after which Collins would sing a hymn for everyone. He noted that everyone could not sing together because it would be too loud, and someone was always clearing so they would know to stop if the guards were coming.

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27 Alvarez, Chained Eagle, 126.
28 Ibid.
29 George Hall, Pat Hall, and Bob Pittman, Commitment to Honor: A Prisoner of War Remembers Vietnam (Jackson, MS: Franklin Printers, 2005), 52.
conducted a weekly Lutheran Communion service, tapping on the bars to herald each section.\textsuperscript{32} Frederick McMurray, a Roman Catholic, performed his own “Mini Mass,” pretending his dark brown water was wine.\textsuperscript{33}

Across all of the camps, the prisoners filled their church time with music, however quietly it had to be. Mo Baker wrote, “For about an hour we would worship, each in our own way. You could hear phrases of hymns being voiced throughout the camp.”\textsuperscript{34} He personally sang all of his favorites from the Cokesbury Worship Hymnal, including “A Mighty Fortress is My God,” “Onward Christian Soldiers,” and “Amazing Grace.”\textsuperscript{35} Ray Alcorn sang “Rock of Ages,” “How Great Thou Art,” “The Old Rugged Cross,” and more.\textsuperscript{36}

For those who were nervous about the consequences of singing, the camps occasionally got a reprieve. Charlie Plumb explained how a power failure after dark would offer the prisoners certain liberties:

Guards did not dare enter our pitch-black cells, so we could get by with actions that were normally prohibited…. Someone would start singing one of his favorite hymns or songs, and soon the entire group would join in. We could hear the guards banging and warning us to cease, but we knew that they would not brave darkness to do anything about it. It was great to join together and harmonize.\textsuperscript{37}

Plumb recalled singing “Glory, Glory, Hallelujah” on one of those dark nights.


\textsuperscript{34} Mo Baker, e-mail to author, September 16, 2015.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{36} Ray Alcorn, e-mail to author, August 30, 2015.

\textsuperscript{37} Plumb, \textit{I’m No Hero}, 91.
Later in the war, most prisoners lived in larger groups, but the hardest resistors and highest ranks remained in solitary in a building they named Rawhide. The SRO of all the prisoners, Col. John Flynn, lived there. When Flynn determined that his building should hold a church service, the entire group worked together to clear the area of guards. After prayer and scripture recitation, Jack Finley whistled “Ave Maria,” of which Howard Rutledge wrote, “I don’t remember hearing anything so beautiful in my life as Jack’s version of that great old Catholic song.”

Perhaps inspired by this touching performance, and in spite of cement barriers, the men in Rawhide formed a choir with each member in a separate cell. They worshiped regularly, and “those men could really sing,” according to Rutledge. “We were all denominations. All the things that could have divided us didn’t matter in Building Zero. We were united in our faith in God and in each other. Nothing else mattered.”

This introduction to the importance and practice of faith in the prisoner-of-war camps is clearly short on musical content, but music was a necessary component to the faith-life of these prisoners, and yet only a component. The men who suffered the most depended on faith the most. They may not have gone into prison so determinedly religious and patriotic, but they returned and remained that way.

Many of the earliest shootdowns and most tortured prisoners went on to write books and deliver speeches about their faith. These books and speeches tell of how faith and music helped them survive their time in solitary. Even though the songs could not be overtly performed, they were the foundation of the shared experiences the POWs called

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38 Rutledge, In the Presence, 80.

39 Ibid.
church. In a world of forced silence, music retained its power to heal and strengthen the mind in which it played. And the simple act of simultaneously performing a ritual helped to placate the need for human contact. The next chapter will reveal how the POWs carried their faith and music into a group environment.
Chapter Five

The Fight for Communal Worship

The sounds and smells of the camp still occasionally haunt me in my dreams, but I have some pleasant memories of music sung by my fellow POWs. A small group of men quietly singing Christmas carols late in the evening. A friend singing a song about the passing of time as we pace around the room, side by side. Nobody sings “O Holy Night” as beautifully as Gobel James. Certain songs bring tears to my eyes. That is one of them.

– Ted Ballard, “The Traditional One-String Instrument”

Faith, music, and discipline helped the captives in North Vietnam to survive the maddening isolation of solitary confinement and the unspeakable pain of torture. It’s hardly surprising that those in the worst possible conditions would turn to God and each other for help. However, one might expect the prisoners to deny their dependence on others once their situation improves, once their basic needs were being met. This was not the case in Vietnam, where “ninety-nine percent of the prisoners would participate in church services.”

After years of little to no human contact, the idea of several people squeezed into a tiny space actually sounded appealing to the POWs. As more pilots were shot down and captured, the Vietnamese (VN) were forced to give prisoners the gift of roommates. These men shared everything from their darkest secrets to their overflowing honey pots, producing “a closeness that has no parallel in a normal life (see fig. 5.1).” As Charles Boyd explained, “You either get along with your roommate or you kill him,” so the men

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worked diligently to bond with those who were always in reach, strengthened by their common faith and their common enemy.⁴


The ability to communicate freely did not dampen the POWs’ desire to worship. Bill Metzger affirmed, “I participated in numerous services with as little as 3 other guys to as many as 30+.”⁵ Charles Boyd reported, “Every cell in which I lived, whether with one POW or 40, held Sunday services. Simple, to be sure, but meaningful.”⁶ Gene Smith agreed, “We always had church, even when there were four of us…. We would just pick a time and one of us would be in charge, and we would have prayer and we would

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⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Bill Metzger, e-mail message to author, September 7, 2015.

⁶ Boyd, “Prison Camp Diary.”
discuss whatever Bible verse we could remember, and then we would have our prayer.”

He added that in Camp Faith, a more lenient camp, his cell had nine prisoners and they would sing at their service.7 In that cell, Smith and Mo Baker wrote a new verse to “How Great Thou Art” about “how God has sustained us while we’ve been up here.”8 Their verse has been performed thousands of times since their release (see Appendix G).

The communal church services provided fellowship and comfort for prisoners of varying faiths. Ralph Gaither recalled his time in Son Tay, AKA Camp Hope:

The new companionship was unbelievable. We were able to share knowledge and to help each other over the rough times. We could have fellowship in church services, in games, in shooting the bull. It was great. A lot of denominations were represented there; but we had beautiful fellowship together. We helped each other celebrate every holiday, and we helped each other worship so that no man would be alone.9

Joe Kittinger wrote, “Whenever a new prisoner was brought into our group, his first Sunday service was guaranteed to bring a tear to his eye. The services always reminded us of home, family, and freedom.”10

Singing was technically not allowed in any camp, but some guards would look the other way, especially on Christmas, when most POWs celebrated by softly singing carols. Religion, though, was always taboo. Jerry Coffee was in a cell of about 20 POWs in the early 1970s. He recounted, “We had been pressing the V for a bible or a guitar. Not

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7 Gene Smith, telephone interview with author, August 28, 2015.


surprisingly, they chose the guitar.”

Soon, the prisoners would use music to fight for religious freedom.

**Unified**

Up to that point I had spent fifty-eight months in solitary confinement with only a few short breaks; that is 1,740 days alone. Other men had spent over four years in solitary, too; and here we were, milling about in a big room, shaking hands with men we had known and loved for years – men we knew intimately, yet had never seen. For years it had taken as much as twenty-four hours to get a message around that crowd and twenty-four hours to get the answer back. Men had risked and suffered much to communicate a sentence in a day. Now, suddenly, we were face-to-face. Everybody wanted to talk to everybody else simultaneously. It was a wild and happy Christmas night.

– Howard Rutledge, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies*  

Some prisoners enjoyed modest freedoms, such as the ability to talk, when they moved in with their colleagues in the late 60s. Others continued to suffer alone for several more years. As discussed in Chapter 2, the U.S. military’s attempted rescue at Son Tay in 1970 changed everything. The VN were shocked that the Americans would risk their lives to save their POWs from deep inside enemy territory. They acted quickly over the next few months, herding all the prisoners into the newly opened Camp Unity, a section of the Hanoi Hilton featuring seven large cells that held approximately fifty men in each (see fig. 5.2).

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11 Jerry Coffee, e-mail message to author, September 4, 2015.

The exhilaration in Room Seven, which housed the highest-ranking officers and most of the resisters, reached a fever pitch as the Alcatraz Gang, the hardest resisters, walked in on Christmas night. Howard Rutledge recalled, “We laughed and hugged and chatted excitedly.” These men had spent the previous two years in complete silence and isolation and were forced to leave a man behind when they moved. They walked the line between ecstasy and dismay. Jerry Denton suggested that a Christmas service would lift their spirits. The Alcatraz Gang volunteered, with Rutledge leading the service, George Coker quoting scripture, and Sam Johnson singing “Silent Night.” When Johnson choked

\[13\] Ibid.
on a sob, all the men in Room Seven joined the song. After years of worshipping alone and in silence, all of the Americans lifted their voices together, only to be interrupted by guards shouting, “No authorize!” The POWs grumbled as they wedged their bodies close together on the concrete platform and tried to sleep.

The excitement of the new living situation quickly lent itself to logistical issues, and the SROs called on their training to organize the cells and assign roles to each POW. The duties varied by cell, but every group had soldiers in charge of physical health (food, medicine, cleaning) and mental/spiritual health (communication and religion). Each cell in Unity had a structure determined by the unique talents of the men it housed. Ted Ballard noted, “We became better organized militarily, academically, and religiously.” Charlie Plumb reminisced, “In November 1970 we were happy to be able to discuss, joke, and laugh together in our larger cells, but it was especially rewarding to join for prayer in person.” When Plumb was named the chaplain of his cell, he quickly told his superior that he “would be honored to do so, but that [he] wasn’t a walking Bible and would need assistance.” He was joined by Kay Russell, the choir director, and Tom Barrett, the Catholic service leader for that cell.


17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.
One of the first priorities in every cell was church. Robbie Risner of Room Seven wrote, “On the first day we were all together, several of the men had asked me about having a common church service. I had dreamed about this for a long time, so naturally I was extremely enthusiastic.” Despite an even split between Catholics and Protestants, the POWs were able to find common ground and conduct their worship together. Risner explained, “If we hadn’t learned it before imprisonment, we knew by now there is no dividing line between faiths. God listens to every man regardless of his church choice.”

From the American culture where churches often split over slight doctrinal differences and diverse musical tastes, these men managed to conduct church services that embraced every religion or lack of religion represented. One POW stated, “We had a choir – we had the atheist, the Jew, Baptists, Catholics, and Protestants, Christian Scientists, the Mormon – we had the whole nine yards.” When asked if he was offended by the outward showing of faith by his fellow POWs, the lone atheist interviewed for this study countered, “I participated in a desire to foster group morale. I took part in services and demonstrations in support of them not for any support of religion, but only to support the protest that we were being deprived of a right guaranteed by the Geneva Conventions.” Ralph Galati added, “Even guys who weren’t very religious, everybody prayed, and there was also a little bit of in your face. It was a chance of providing a little

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19 Robinson Risner, *The Passing of the Night: My Seven Years as a Prisoner of the North Vietnamese* (Duncanville, TX: World Wide Printing, 1999), 200.

20 Ibid.


22 Peter Schoeffel, e-mail message to author, September 2, 2015.
bit of resistance as best you could. So it had a lot of value.”

James Kula agreed that “there was never someone sitting in the corner by himself who did not participate in the worship services,” because it provided a common bond and was something that “the prisoners instinctively turned to for strength and comfort.”

Some prisoners who “had not been very religious” found that the services “sustained” them. Some “who had no faith found faith during [their] religious services.”

Larry Chesley of the Latter-Day Saints said, “I was immensely impressed by the spiritual uplift I received from those meetings. I suppose our circumstances had a lot to do with the effect, but as I look back I feel that some of my choicest spiritual experiences came out of those meetings in that dingy room.”

James Mulligan wrote, “I can honestly say that these Sunday services conducted in the barred cell where we normally ate our meals were some of the most moving and genuine religious experiences that I had ever experienced.”

The only known complaints from prisoners centered on the “constant choir practice,” which necessarily occurred in the same room.

Dick Stratton could never forget “a POW ‘choir’s’ endless repetition ad nauseum of ‘Praise

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23 Ralph Galati, telephone interview by author, September 5, 2014.


27 Larry Chesley, *Seven Years in Hanoi: A POW Tells His Story* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, Inc., 1973), 89.


God from Whom all Blessings Flow’ and ‘We Wish You a Merry Christmas.’” He remarked, “Even to this day I cringe when I hear their songs or hear them perform.”

While each cell planned and performed its own service, a similar program was developed across the camp. Typically, a different POW was appointed each week for each segment. One man would pray and another would recite scripture. Another man would provide a speech or sermon “on some aspect of religion or character, morality in our society, or a good thought for the day.” Each cell formed a choir which fluctuated in size according to the camp rules of the day. Most cells included patriotic themes, such as the Pledge of Allegiance and “God Bless America.” Galati remarked, “So we would call it a church service, but it wasn’t really a big, big religious service.”

The quality and complexity of the music varied greatly depending on the choir’s director and singers. When asked about singing in the choir, Danny Glenn replied, “I just did what I was told…. We had a pretty good choir going. It’s not like we sang loud or anything.” Glenn’s choir consisted of four men with limited musical experience. Cell Three’s choir was led by Phil Butler, a “very talented youngster,” and had eight singers. Gene Smith remembered it fondly:

It was as good a choir as I ever sang in. And it was all done from memory. We’d put our parts together…. It was four-part harmony. This was done without music. Just digging in the recesses of our memory. And remembering verses to songs. It was 50 guys in that room. We had several hymns with a couple or 3 verses, and of

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30 Richard A. Stratton, e-mail message to author, August 26, 2015.
31 Boyd, “Prison Camp Diary.”
32 Kittinger, Come Up and Get Me, 165.
33 Galati, interview.
course we remembered all the old folk songs that we used to sing that the
Kingston Trio and that bunch did.\textsuperscript{35}

Cell Seven had a six-man choir led by Tom Kirk, a former band leader. For their first
service, they sang “America,” “The Old Rugged Cross” and “In the Garden.”\textsuperscript{36}

Quincy Collins, the “Music Man” of the POWs, used his talents to lift everyone’s
spirits, as “music was the easiest road that [he] had to travel.” A perfectionist by nature,
Collins did the best he could with a group of imperfect guys “trying to rehearse in a
crapper.” He recalled a “completely different atmosphere” after each time his choir sang:

For them to hear the Star-Spangled Banner in a prison cell, up the road from
where there’s a choir singing it, and I’m looking at my guys singing it, and every
ounce of energy in their body was in this song. Whew! It is overpowering, and it
is hard to recreate that. But I had my challenge to do that, and it was not always
easy, because I had to fight some of my own people in order to get a choir to start
with. And they’re saying well, what the hell do we need a choir for? So I had to
be persistent. I had to be persuasive. And the choir had to be good.\textsuperscript{37}

Collins had to fight for his choir because the risks involved seemed too great to many.

\textbf{The Fight for Religious Freedom}

The pressure to discontinue worship mounted. Though the torture had ended,
threats were made. Reprisals were promised. The guards would heckle us, trying
to drown out the words of those who led – but we refused to give up our right to
worship God. It seemed the most natural and proper issue on which to take our
stand. We enjoyed this new taste of communal life, but we would risk the
privilege to keep our right to worship together. A showdown was inevitable.

– Howard Rutledge, \textit{In the Presence of Mine Enemies}\textsuperscript{38}

Moon Mullen was the SRO of his cell on New Year’s Eve, 1970. The men
celebrated the holiday by quietly humming “Auld Lang Syne,” but their enthusiasm

\textsuperscript{35} Smith, interview.

\textsuperscript{36} Risner, \textit{The Passing of the Night}, 201.

\textsuperscript{37} J. Quincy Collins, interview by author, Charlotte, NC, February 4, 2016.

\textsuperscript{38} Rutledge, \textit{In the Presence}, 77.
swelled until they were belting out “God Bless America.” Mullen recalled, “It was a beautiful thing; I really had tears in my eyes. We all knew what the consequences might be, but we just felt so good and we were just expressing ourselves and the way we felt toward one another and toward what we were.” Mullen was moved to solitary confinement the following day and then spent a year in the Skid Row punishment camp.

Multiple “outbursts of singing” throughout the holiday season pushed the VN to prohibit “loud noise and large gatherings,” and offenders found themselves back in Heartbreak Hotel. To carry on with their planned Sunday worship, the POWs would be openly defying the Camp Authority. The VN did not approve of church services and they quickly made this clear. To the Communist mind, worshipping as a group posed a huge threat, and the guards saw the services as indoctrination sessions. Sam Johnson explained, “The paranoia of the totalitarian regime interprets any spontaneous assembly as a direct threat to the party’s control.” Rutledge added, “Asians, friends and foes alike, use singing and speeches in group gatherings like our church services for political purposes. Our service was immediately suspected of being a dangerous rallying point. Of course, we tried to explain that we had assembled simply to worship God.”


42 Sam Johnson and Jan Winebrenner, Captive Warriors: A Vietnam POW’s Story (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1992), 246.

43 Rutledge, In the Presence, 77.
After the armed guards shouted their warnings at the first service, some POWs decided the danger was not worth it. Johnson noted, “To what extreme would they go to punish us if we persisted in holding worship services? We had no way of knowing.”

The senior officers debated, with some favoring the safer option; i.e., “not making an issue of the worship services, lest the Vietnamese retaliate by moving everyone back into small or solitary cells.” A few of the die-hard resisters disagreed, believing “that making a moral stand on the freedom of religion took precedence over political strategy.” Risner declared, “We knew the Vietnamese would be upset, but we decided to do it anyway.” Johnson declared, “We would pay whatever it cost.”

When a particularly vicious guard, nicknamed Bug by the POWs, heard about the prisoners’ rebellion, he visited the men with an ultimatum. “How would you like to go back to treatment of 1967?” he threatened. The treatment of 1967 consisted of constant torture, isolation, and starvation. Obviously, the POWs worried that Bug would follow through with his threat that “the next church service involving more than eight people” would be “broken up.” However, the Camp Authority was denying the prisoners their

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44 Johnson, Captive Warriors, 246.


46 Ibid.

47 Risner, The Passing of the Night, 201.

48 Johnson, Captive Warriors, 246.

religious freedoms guaranteed by the Geneva Convention of 1949, which states,

“Prisoners of war shall enjoy complete latitude in the exercise of their religious duties, including attendance at the service of their faith.” Charlie Plumb recounted the POWs’ reasoning behind continuing their services:

From the first POW who stepped onto North Vietnamese soil on 5 August 1964, prisoners had been asking for improved treatment…. At the top of the list, however, was always the Bible and permission to hold church services. Over the years the V consented to better food and shelter, but they adamantly rejected our requests for a Bible and Christian fellowship. Since our general lifestyles had improved somewhat by 1971, and since our unity provided greater bargaining power, we decided to press the issue.

For men who wholeheartedly believed that their faith had saved their lives, religious freedom was worth the fight.

With the looming threat of torture and solitary living, the POWs chose to take a stand on an issue with seemingly little importance. They could have fought for clean water, adequate nutrition, or medical treatment, but the prisoners instead unified behind this single cause – religion. Were they taunting their captors, or testing the limits of their new living arrangements? Risner contended, “We were not deliberately baiting them, for we knew it was in our best interest not to.”

Still, there was an element of rebellion in their actions. Galati maintained, “It wasn’t that we were doing it for spite, which we were, but because it was important for us to do it, it was that connection with your faith

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51 Plumb, I’m No Hero, 229.

and being home. And it gave you a little bit of solidarity, because you also kinda remembered who you were.”

The Red Cross explored this passion for religion among prisoners of war:

Morale always exerts a physical effect, but it is more acute in the case of persons who have lost their freedom, because their inner life tends to grow in importance. It has often been noticed that people who paid little or even no attention to their religion reverted to their childhood practices once they became prisoners of war, and found comfort. This phenomenon has been observed not only among Christians, but among the followers of all religious faiths.

While the exact cause of this return to faith is unknown, it has been a source of hope for POWs of many wars, but the POWs in Vietnam, still considered air pirates, were not protected by the Geneva Convention. Ralph Gaither declared, “The Vietnamese had a hard time understanding the importance to us, but it was this freedom we chose to fight for. The enemy claimed that we already had the right to worship. Any man could worship silently, but they would not authorize group worship.” These men had been silent for too long, and they were ready to make some noise.

The Church of Rebellion

Our captors were convinced that the services were a cover for conspiracy. We were having political rallies and leadership classes, they thought (we were not). They were afraid of our choirs and the singing, and were especially afraid that their own people outside the prison would hear us. They threatened us with every kind of punishment if we did not stop the services. We refused.

– Ralph Gaither, With God in a P.O.W. Camp

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53 Galati, interview.


56 Ibid., 120.
The battle lines were drawn, and each cell in Camp Unity planned their church services for the first Sunday of 1971. Every room had a choir, which had been forbidden by the Camp Authority. Every man who participated knew that he was breaking the rules, yet chose to continue “despite whatever repercussions there would be.” At first, the guards simply watched and reported what happened in the services. They built platforms outside the cells to see through the high windows. Once the service was over, the guards would charge into the cell and order the men to scatter. Johnson recalled, “Week after week, we planned our services and worshipped together, and the guards continued to harass us each Sunday, barging in and stomping about, pushing us apart and shouting, ‘Be quiet! No authorize!’” Galati added, “They would come in with their guns and yell and scream and we’d stop, and then we’d do it again next week.”

As tensions rose, the guards began to come in during the services to break up the gatherings. Ted Guy reported, “We ignored him and continued the service. The next day, the Senior Officer was taken out and told in no uncertain terms that it would not be tolerated again. We finally had an issue that we felt we could defend and a service was scheduled for the following Sunday.” The prisoners knew they would not get through another church service without grave consequences, but instead of backing down, they

57 Galati, interview.

58 Chesley, *Seven Years in Hanoi*, 88.


60 Johnson, *Captive Warriors*, 246.

61 Galati, interview.

planned more elaborate ceremonies.\textsuperscript{63} For example, Room Seven’s choir sang in harmony for the first time, with a special “threefold amen to close with, thanks to a marine who had sung with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.”\textsuperscript{64}

Planning the service was easier than planning for the potential outcomes. The officers in Room Seven tried to anticipate how the VN would react and develop contingency plans.\textsuperscript{65} Risner wrote, “First of all, we expected they would start pulling out the leaders and putting them in solitary confinement. The intent would be to keep pulling out the leadership until the losses became too great, and the remaining men acquiesced.”\textsuperscript{66} To prevent this, the prisoners selected a different man to lead each section of the service, so that one person would not take all the blame.\textsuperscript{67} They also agreed that if the guards pulled out the leaders, they “would continue until the last junior officer was left alone.”\textsuperscript{68} Room Seven alerted the other cells of their plans for that Sunday, February 7, 1971, and let each man decide for himself if he would join.

Sunday morning came, and everyone took their places while the guards lined up at the door. The individual experiences varied somewhat depending on the cell, but prisoners from every room recorded what happened that day. Since Room Seven instigated the demonstration, their story comes first. A four-man choir softly sang “Rock

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{64} Johnson, \textit{Captive Warriors}, 246.

\textsuperscript{65} Risner, \textit{The Passing of the Night}, 203.

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{67} Denton, \textit{When Hell Was in Session}, 219.

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid.
of Ages” as Bug barged in with two turnkeys, nicknamed Ichabod and Hawk.\textsuperscript{69} Hawk instructed the choir to stop, but he was ignored. George Coker presented a sermon, Howie Rutledge quoted scripture, and Robbie Risner gave a benediction. Hawk consistently told them, “No talk,” but they continued. Ichabod ordered them to be quiet, to no avail. Hawk told the congregation to disperse, but they continued to stand together.\textsuperscript{70} “No one obeyed anything that the Vietnamese said.”\textsuperscript{71} “By now the guards were embarrassed and angry and determined to have revenge.”\textsuperscript{72}

As the service ended, Hawk led Risner out of the cell, while two other guards grabbed Coker and Rutledge. Bug shook his fist at them and yelled, “Now you will see my hands not tied!”\textsuperscript{73} The three prisoners were taken to the tiny cells in Heartbreak and locked in leg stocks. Sam Johnson, who remained in Room Seven, declared,

> We would not be intimidated. We had come so far since the early days of leg irons, rope torture, and total deprivation and beatings. But our task was not yet finished. We were still prisoners of war, and our sworn duty was to fight on until release. We would continue to resist the foolish edicts of the North Vietnamese, and our services would not be canceled.\textsuperscript{74}

This resistance would come sooner than Johnson had imagined.

Other cells had similar mornings. Ted Guy said that armed guards broke up his cell’s service with bayonets and proceeded to remove the men conducting the service.\textsuperscript{75}


\textsuperscript{70} Denton, \textit{When Hell Was in Session}, 219.

\textsuperscript{71} Risner, \textit{The Passing of the Night}, 203.

\textsuperscript{72} Rutledge, \textit{In the Presence}, 78.

\textsuperscript{73} Denton, \textit{When Hell Was in Session}, 219.

\textsuperscript{74} Johnson, \textit{Captive Warriors}, 246.

\textsuperscript{75} Guy, “Welcome to the Hanoi Hilton.”
George Hall recounted those same guards with bayonets lining his cellmates against the walls of Room Five. When Bug told the men they could not congregate, the SRO “stepped forward and said that the Geneva Accords on POWs allowed [them] to have religious services and that [they] intended to continue.” This man was arrested and taken from the cell, so the next senior officer took his place, informing Bug that they would continue their church services. This man was also arrested, and the pattern continued until the seven top-ranking men were taken. When Bug left, the next senior man ordered the prisoners to resume their service. Ronald Byrne credited the Code of Conduct and survival training with preparing the soldiers to stand up to the Vietnamese. The senior officers in his cell were also taken one by one, only to be replaced by the next in line. He noted, “After a while, the North Vietnamese found they were filling all the solitary cells and were forced to allow the holding of religious services.” A dearth of solitary cells might have played a small part in the VN’s change of heart, but the main factor was what happened after the senior men were taken.

**The Church Riot**

Our greatest triumph as POWs was the riot all 360 of us implemented to bring pressure that religious services could be held…. We held the service as planned with different men reading scripture, praying and offering the sermon. Some senior officers were removed and put in solitary. While those men were being led away all of the POW’s sang the “Star Spangled Banner.” It resounded in the streets of Hanoi. We won – religious services on Sunday were no longer denied – our finest hour.

— James L. Hughes, *We Came Home*  

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76 George R. Hall and Pat Hall, *Commitment to Honor: A Prisoner of War Remembers Vietnam*, (Jackson, MS: Franklin Printers, 2005), 108.

77 Wyatt, *We Came Home*, 98.

78 Ibid., 269.
The accounts of the Church Riot show some discrepancies, just as the eyewitness statements of a crime often disagree on the color of the getaway car. The date on which it supposedly happened, the time of day, and the order of events do not always match, but the intensity of the POWs’ emotions and the reactions of the Vietnamese are clear in every narrative. Every prisoner in Camp Unity in the winter of 1971 told the story of their finest hour. Through these stories, both the facts and the essence of the event can be captured.

By all accounts, the revolution began in Room Seven, home to the highest-ranking officers, recaptured escapees, and hardest resisters. While other men in that cell had reported a solemn, quiet service, Dick Stratton remembered it differently:

We had mustered a great choir, the majority of whom could not carry a tune in a wheel barrow, but who made a lot of noise. A couple of frustrated hell fire and damnation preachers in our midst prepared to regale us with our sinful conduct and general unworthiness. The whole event went off with great fanfare, catcalls, amens, hootin’ and howling.79

As mentioned earlier, the guards had come in with weapons and removed Risner, Rutledge, and Coker. Rutledge remembered the guards leaving after the service while he waited fifteen minutes “for the ax to fall.”80 Others claimed the three leaders were taken out immediately.

At first, the men were led outside where they stood with their backs against the building. The prisoners in Room Seven climbed on their bunks to see what was happening outside the windows.81 They knew what awaited the instigators. Sam Johnson


80 Rutledge, In the Presence, 78.

81 Denton, When Hell Was in Session, 219.
could only watch as the guards “marched out Robbie Risner at gunpoint for more torture sessions, probably on the ropes or the meat hook.”82 Leo Thorsness later wrote, “The SRO says, ‘If you guys really want to have a church service, I’ll lead’ knowing full well torture was his lot. We had church and he had torture. The purest leadership I’ll ever see.”83 Even though the POWs had known this was a possibility, the VN’s action brought the Americans’ “collective ire up to a fever pitch.”84

The seeds of rebellion had been sown, and this was the last straw. Rutledge was shocked by what happened next. “As we stood, each alone with his own questions, each handling his own anxieties, a fantastic thing happened. Somewhere in Cell Block 7 someone began to sing the first verse of ‘The Star-Spangled Banner.’”85 George “Bud” Day jumped on the platform bed and belted the anthem with all his might. John McCain mentioned this event in Day’s eulogy:

He could not be broken in spirit no matter how broken he was in body. Knowing him in prison, confronting our enemies day in and day out (we never yielded), in front of men who had the power of life and death over us. To witness him sing the national anthem in response to having a rifle pointed at his face – well that was something to behold.86

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84 Stratton, “The Three P’s of Survival.”

85 Rutledge, In the Presence, 79.

86 Christopher Callaway, “Emerald Coast Pays Tribute to Air Force Legend,” MIG Sweep, Fall 2013: 20.
Before Day could finish the first line, the “entire room burst into song.”\textsuperscript{87} The fury spread like wildfire, and each cell picked up the tune so that as the three leaders were ushered away, Rutledge noted, “It seemed that every cell block in Camp Unity was singing.”\textsuperscript{88} Risner had never been prouder:

\begin{quotation}
I have never heard a sound like it. We had not heard “The Star-Spangled Banner” during all those years, except in our own minds or under our breath. Now, though, it was ringing throughout the camp, over the wall and into the city of Hanoi. It lifted up everybody in the whole stinking camp! As they sang, I think George, Howie and I stood a little taller, a little straighter.\textsuperscript{89}
\end{quotation}

Risner knew that every man singing was risking the same torture that he was about to endure,\textsuperscript{90} and this show of solidarity gave him untold strength. He later recalled, “I felt like I was nine feet tall and could go bear hunting with a switch.” This statement prompted Ross Perot to commission a nine-foot bronze statue of Brigadier General Robinson Risner which now stands in the Air Force Academy (see fig. 5.3).\textsuperscript{91} Rutledge likewise had a lump in his throat as he marched towards a grim and unknown future. “The months that followed were torturous,” he wrote. “Alone again after a taste of communal living, locked in Heartbreak-sized small cells, forced to communicate covertly again was torture, indeed. But we had conquered!”\textsuperscript{92}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[87] John M. McGrath, “Mac’s Facts No. 45 – Room 7, Hanoi Hilton,” e-mail to NAM-POW mailing list, August 18, 2006.
\item[88] Rutledge, \textit{In the Presence}, 79.
\item[89] Risner, \textit{The Passing of the Night}, 204.
\item[90] Ablaya, \textit{Home with Honor}, 243.
\item[91] McGrath, “Mac’s Facts No. 45.”
\item[92] Rutledge, \textit{In the Presence}, 79.
\end{footnotes}
After Risner, Rutledge, and Coker’s exit, the details get a little murky. It is possible that different cells had different experiences, or that incidents like this happened more than once. Some accounts show the entire camp continued singing from this moment, while others claim the actual Church Riot happened later in the day. Some POWs thought the riot lasted one day, and others remembered it as two or more days. The order of the songs varies somewhat, but the songs themselves are consistent. The guards’ reactions were likely more violent towards the worst offenders and more relaxed towards the other cells. This summary will take all of these factors into account.

Ted Guy, who was not in Room Seven, recalled, “We were quite upset and seethed with pent-up anger all afternoon.”  

Risner reported, “The word went out that they had tried to kill our church service. It really fired up the troops.”  

Jerry Denton said

93 Guy, “Welcome to the Hanoi Hilton.”

94 Risner, The Passing of the Night, 204.
he “could almost feel the pulsation of emotion flowing from prisoners.” Ted Guy and Lee Ellis remembered someone singing “God Bless America” at dusk. Stuart Rochester, the chief historian for the Department of Defense, wrote that the men “renewed the protest” in the late afternoon. Since other accounts clearly indicate that the riot continued into the night, this is the most likely conclusion: Bud Day sang the national anthem as his cell’s leaders were marched away in the morning, and the actual riot began near dusk.

The details of who started the riot and with which song hold little significance, however. The singing started in Room Seven, with either the national anthem or “God Bless America.” Both of these songs held great importance in the hearts and minds of the POWs. Once again, their faith in God and country united to fortify the prisoners. Denton rejoiced when Bud Day began singing “The Star-Spangled Banner.” He said, “As his hoarse voice rose in triumph, the rest of us joined in, our voices rolling through the courtyard and over the walls in a full, joyous crescendo. A hundred guys couldn’t stop us. It was the first time in many years that I had heard our national anthem, and my heart swelled and tears rolled down my cheeks.” What began as a “low-key quiet song” grew in volume as the men grew in confidence and defiance. Day proudly recalled, “Unlike

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95 Denton, *When Hell Was in Session*, 220.


Russian prisoners who accepted their lot with scarcely a whisper of complaint, these mice began to roar like lions.”

Jim Stockdale boasted that Room Seven’s “standing, shouting rendition of ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ could be heard over much of downtown Hanoi.” As their voices rang across the courtyard, the other cellblocks followed suit and passed the song around the semicircular buildings. Each room then “vied for militancy and loudness in a one-after-another rendition of American patriotic songs.” Throughout the camp, beleaguered men stood to join the “protest in song,” peacefully “demanding the release of our leaders and freedom to practice our religion.”

The POWs sang through the entire patriotic songbook and moved on to each state’s song; e.g., “California, Here I Come,” “Yellow Rose of Texas,” “Georgia on My Mind,” etc. Mixed in between the songs of nationalistic and state pride were many hymns, such as “Onward Christian Soldiers.” Johnson reveled in their performance of the “Battle Hymn of the Republic.” He wrote, “The sound of men’s voices filled the prison like a huge, unpracticed glee club as more than three hundred men hung their

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101 Ibid.

102 Stratton, “The Three P’s of Survival.”


heads out the windows of Camp Unity and bellowed. It was more noise than music, but to me it was beautiful.”

“Running out of breath and voice,” and perhaps running out of songs they all knew, Room Seven resorted to chanting in military fashion. Larry Guarino bellowed, “This is building 7, building 7, building 7, this is building number 7. Where the hell is building 6?” The chant continued around the compound (see fig. 5.4), which now sounded like “a stadium cheering section.” Although he was in another building, Ernie Brace noticed that “the chant grew louder as it was picked up by the younger, more energetic officers in 2, 3, and 4, and each successive squad bay tried to outdo the one preceding it.” When the chant reached Room One, the prisoners called out to those in Building Zero, also known as Rawhide, to continue. Though the eight prisoners in Rawhide were isolated and unaware of why the riot was occurring, they continued the “roundrobin” chant with “This is zero, this is zero, where the hell is double zero?”

105 Johnson, Captive Warriors, 246.

106 Stratton, “The Three P’s of Survival.”

107 Ellis, Leading with Honor, 151.

108 Rochester, Honor Bound, 530.

109 Ernest Brace, A Code to Keep (Central Point, OR: Hellgate Press, 1988); 173.

110 Ibid.
Those in double zero passed the chant on to triple zero, but the men in triple zero did not respond. These cells housed members of the “Peace Committee” who protested both the war and the other prisoners. Edison Miller, one of the leaders of the PCs, wrote a poem about the Church Riot that he would later read over the camp radio, entitled “Cowards Sing at Night.” Miller’s poetry infuriated the POWs:

The Valiant often stand alone
And speak from heart and mind.
The Coward seeks the crows and night,
His face he hides from sight and light.

The Valiant try to understand.
They often wonder why.
The Coward’s voice is heard in vain. He calls forth God and Flag by name.\textsuperscript{111}

Following repatriation, Miller at first insisted he had not been brainwashed by the Vietnamese, but later conceded, “Maybe I was a little.”\textsuperscript{112} The PCs will be discussed more thoroughly in Part III.

After waiting a moment to see if Building 000 would respond, the rest of the camp cheered and continued their songfest.\textsuperscript{113} Johnson recalled, “They wanted a demonstration, I thought as we sang song after song without pausing for breath. So we’ll give them a demonstration!”\textsuperscript{114} Plumb avowed, “Three, four, five or six hard years of pent-up emotion and frustration were launched on the wings of song into the night…. A semblance of self-respect returned!” Lee Ellis noted, “More than three hundred voices were exulting without inhibition from all seven rooms. The proud strains rang out over the fifteen-foot walls of the camp and reverberated outside in the streets of downtown Hanoi.”\textsuperscript{115} The location of the prison and the strength of the POWs’ voices presented a massive problem to the Camp Authority. These American voices “could be heard for blocks” and the capital city’s citizens “stopped in bewilderment” at the sound of joyous exultation.\textsuperscript{116} Although the prisoners knew they would pay dearly for their behavior,
nothing could stop them. Jim Stockdale reasoned, “Our minds were now free, and we knew it.”

The impromptu concert in Camp Unity continued for two hours, most of the night, or even two and a half days depending on the source. Eugene McDaniel remembered the prisoners singing under their mosquito nets at night “so they couldn’t blame it on any one person.” However long the singing lasted, the VN did not stand idly by as it happened.

Quelling the Riot

The Vietnamese were in a panic. Officers and guards were running pell-mell in all directions. There was an audio riot going on right in the middle of Hanoi by the irate and emotional POWs and the Vietnamese didn’t know what to do about it. They lost face, and we’ll pay the price tomorrow, I said silently to myself. But it was worth it, every damn word and song. We had vented our anger, and in so doing, we had stood up for our rights. It was our proudest hour as a group.

– James Mulligan, The Hanoi Commitment

Before that night, the mere presence of a guard was enough to silence any man in the Hanoi Hilton. Everyone knew what happened to the offenders. Any other day, seeing the courtyard overrun with the riot squad would have filled the prisoners with terror, but they were high with power and emboldened by the force of their voices in unison. Their music proved that their souls had survived the impossible years, and they believed they

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118 Day, Return with Honor, 196.
119 Denton, When Hell Was in Session, 220.
120 McDaniel, Before Honor, 148.
121 Ibid.
122 Mulligan, The Hanoi Commitment, 238.
could conquer any obstacle in their way now that they were together. Johnson triumphed, “Our bodies might be mangled and scarred, but our spirits remained intact.”

When the VN blared the loudspeakers in an attempt to drown out the singing, the prisoners sang even louder.

The prisoners never raised a hand towards their captors, nor did they try to escape, but the intensity of their vocal protest was enough that “the Vietnamese actually thought they had a riot on their hands.” Stratton wrote, “By then the communists were frantic. They called out the riot squad and posted guards in all the windows with AK-47’s.”

The guards climbed on platforms and ladders to stick their rifles through the high windows (see fig. 5.5). “They shouted for silence and obedience,” but “this only served to encourage even more POWs,” according to Everett Alvarez. Gaither remarked, “The guards screamed all kinds of vindictives and nearly broke out in hives trying to stop them.” Ellis wrote, “The doors to all rooms were flung open and squads of troops — complete with hard hats, fixed bayonets, and tear gas — entered each cell.”

Johnson recounted,

They ran toward each room, shouting and screeching in panic…ready to quell a riot that didn’t exist. ‘No authorize! No authorize! Quiet! No singing! Down! Get

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123 Johnson, *Captive Warriors*, 246.

124 Townley, *Defiant*, 310.


126 Stratton, “The Three P’s of Survival.”


129 Ellis, *Leading with Honor*, 151.
down! No window!’ It was almost comical to see the confusion and fear in the eyes of the guards as they swarmed in the courtyard, circling us as if we were armed and dangerous. Our singing had terrified them!\footnote{Johnson, \textit{Captive Warriors}, 246.}

Alvarez added, “Other guards stood by with fire hoses, ready to turn on the flow if we escalated the unruliness.”\footnote{Alvarez, \textit{Chained Eagle}, 226.}

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The only way the guards could regain control of the prison was to physically restrain or attack the POWs. John McCain recalled, “The guards rushed in with ropes and subdued the men.”\footnote{Dan Nowicki and Bill Muller, “McCain Profile: Prisoner of War,” \textit{Arizona Republic}, March 1, 2007.} John McGrath and many other prisoners claimed the singing only
ceased when the guards “backed the POWs against the walls with a bayonet in each POW’s stomach.”133 Whether with ropes, bayonets, machine guns, or tear gas, “it took armed troops to break up the concert.”134

The TV movie based on Jeremiah Denton’s book, When Hell Was in Session, features a lengthy scene about the Church Riot in which the guards beat the prisoners to the ground and kick them in the head. In this dramatization, the POWs stand back up and sing the “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” forcing the guards to retreat. While this depiction is out of order, it is highly emotional material that implies the Church Riot was important enough to occupy several minutes of an hour-and-a-half movie covering the entire POW experience.135

The next morning, the protest continued in a quieter fashion. The prisoners decided to fast until their leaders were returned from solitary. Bug met this protest with more force, as told by Denton:

Bug came in backed up by a riot squad and shouted, “Give attention!” Then he called out the names Ligon, Stockdale, and Denton, ordering us to come forward. As we were led out of the building we could see hundreds of troopers, bayonets at the ready, scattered through the courtyard. We were thrown to the ground, our arms roped behind us, and taken to Building Zero.136

The three senior officers moved into a two-man cell, with one man in stocks and the other two men sharing a bunk, each with one leg free (see fig. 5.6). As Stockdale’s left leg was

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133 McGrath, “Mac’s Facts No. 45.”


136 Denton, When Hell Was in Session, 220.
clamped in the stocks he remarked, “Well, I guess we just can’t stand prosperity.” He quickly realized, however, that he had come a long way from his years in solitary. Stockdale exulted, “We could talk! There was no more ‘repentance!’ We dropped off to sleep laughing every night.” The Vietnamese told Risner and the other officers pulled from Room Seven that they were responsible for the riot, while the POWs insisted the disturbance was only their “enthusiastic songs.” Their punishment would keep them separate from the other prisoners for two more years, until just before release.

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137 McGrath, “Mac’s Facts No. 45.”

138 Stockdale, In Love and War, 431.

139 Risner, The Passing of the Night, 207.

140 Ibid.
Now down six officers, Room Seven continued their peaceful protest. They fasted for two days until the VN cut off their water supply, immediately making that demonstration unfeasible. The men consistently reminded their captors “how unjust, unfair and cruel it was to disturb [their] church services.” Then they “started marching everywhere in military formation,” which unnerved the guards. In response, the VN removed more officers, so that by the end of the week, the twelve highest-ranking officers in Room Seven had all been taken to Rawhide. In response, Orson Swindle in Room Six tapped to his neighbors, “Damn, you’d have to get in line to get in trouble in that crowd!” The Camp Authority viewed this punishment as a way to weaken the prisoners’ unity, but their plan backfired. According to Rochester, corralling the senior officers in one building resulted in “binding and strengthening the leadership as never before as the prisoners entered the last phase of the captivity.” Though separated from the general population, the officers could send out directives from a unified governing body.

The officers remaining in Camp Unity did not back down when their superiors were taken. Another Sunday was coming soon, and the SRO alerted the guards that they “would produce another church service; bigger, better, and louder than the last,” a threat that “could not be ignored.” The Vietnamese were so afraid of another songfest that the

141 Ibid., 205.
142 Ibid.
143 McGrath, “Mac’s Facts No. 45.”
144 Rochester, Honor Bound, 532.
145 Day, Return with Honor, 196.
Bud Day explained their fear after the Church Riot:

Nothing like this would dare happen in a Communist country. Such protesters would be thrown immediately into confinement, arrested, or dragged off to a labor camp. When the protesters are already in jail, it creates a real problem. Our action indicated organization against the “camp authorities.” Communists were terrorized by our unity and organization. We got their attention this time! Fearsome thoughts of riots ran through the camp administration. “Why can’t those rotten troublemakers leave well enough alone? Always wanting something. First they wanted to move together. Then they even wanted to stop bowing. When will their unreasonable demands stop? When we cracked their rotten skulls they didn’t sing! These diehards. Give them an inch and they’ll want a mile!”

The volatile atmosphere was palpable, and the Vietnamese could not allow another riot to occur. Though it set a dangerous precedent, they finally announced the large cells would be permitted to hold church services, albeit with “outrageous restrictions.” While this may seem like a small victory to some, the prisoners felt like they had won the war. Sam Johnson saw this triumph as a work of God, and he said a prayer of thanks: “We’re prisoners in a hostile land, raising a ruckus and pushing for our demands – they could take us all out and shoot us if they wanted to, but you’ve intervened again. Thank you, Lord.”

The POWs were thrilled to have their service, but they were frustrated by the “phoney and artificial constraints on the conduct of the service.” Plumb described the

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146 Risner, The Passing of the Night, 205.
147 Day, Return with Honor, 197.
148 Denton, When Hell Was in Session, 221.
149 Townley, Defiant, 312.
150 Stephen Rowan, They Wouldn’t Let Us Die: The Prisoners of War Tell Their Story (Middle Village, NY: Jonathan David Publishers, 1973), 244.
first stipulations: “No one could sing, no one could stand, and everyone would adhere
strictly to camp regulations.” He added that after several weeks, once the VN realized the
services were “not militant,” a four-man choir could sing two hymns. ¹⁵¹ McDaniel
explained that the service was limited to fifteen minutes, and “was often interrupted if
[they] were too loud.”¹⁵² William Stark complained that the rules kept changing:

“No, instead of having 11 people in the choir, you must have only eight.” And
they’d come around and count. Eight people can make more noise than 11 if they
put their minds to it, and this was the phoniness of it. In the room in which I lived,
we used it as one more means of resistance. We’re going to have 11. We didn’t
need 11. We could get along with eight. We could get along with two. When it’s
all said and done, you could get along perfectly well without the damn choir. But,
you’ve got to fight them. You’ve got to fight them at every turn.”¹⁵³

The Vietnamese also demanded that the worship leaders “write down what you are going
to do, write the words in the songs, the scripture verses, everything!”¹⁵⁴ The senior
officers in Rawhide allowed each building to decide how they would handle their service,
but they directed, “Don’t write the songs. Don’t write the scriptures. You can give them
the names, the schedule and the program. But do not write out the words.”¹⁵⁵

With their new rebellious streak paying off, the Americans renewed their fight for
complete religious freedom, this time by staring at the guards threateningly. Once again,
Bug reacted swiftly, rounding up thirty-six of “the malcontents, the incorrigibles and the
troublemakers” and shipping them to the Skid Row punishment camp.¹⁵⁶ POWs who had

¹⁵¹ Plumb, I’m No Hero, 230.
¹⁵² McDaniel, Before Honor, 148.
¹⁵³ Rowan, They Wouldn’t Let Us Die, 244.
¹⁵⁴ Risner, The Passing of the Night, 206.
¹⁵⁵ Ibid.
¹⁵⁶ Coram, American Patriot, 235.
actively participated in the “stare” project joined the ranks of Bud Day, John McCain, and other long-time offenders in this filthy, stifling camp.\textsuperscript{157} As they left Camp Unity, someone said, “Well, there go the Hell’s Angels.”\textsuperscript{158}

A total of sixty instigators were dragged off for punishment, leaving hundreds of prisoners still in Camp Unity. After witnessing the treatment of their colleagues, they were expected to comply with their captors, but the Americans had learned a valuable lesson – music had given them power:

\begin{quotation}
We now knew we had a tool in our hands, and one the VC gave us. We knew that by a united chorus of protest on any given point we could push the camp commanders to the point of acquiescing to our demands. This was something we felt we had to have, because the more we could push them to yield for us in their face-saving, the more we gained in our own spirit.\textsuperscript{159}
\end{quotation}

With their newfound power, the prisoners would continue to test their boundaries and cross the lines. Rochester posited that the Church Riot “established a still shifting but mutually recognized line in the sand by which both captor and captives put each other on notice as to what henceforth would be tolerated.”\textsuperscript{160} Alvarez agreed, “With fear vanquished, and on the heels of such a significant victory, we no longer spoke in the hushed tones we had become accustomed to over the years. It was gratifying to reflect that the concession wrung from our captors had stemmed from our faith and our massed demand for the right to conduct religious services.”\textsuperscript{161}

\textsuperscript{157} Rochester, \textit{Honor Bound}, 538.

\textsuperscript{158} Coram, \textit{American Patriot}, 236.

\textsuperscript{159} McDaniel, \textit{Before Honor}, 148.

\textsuperscript{160} Rochester, \textit{Honor Bound}, 532.

\textsuperscript{161} Alvarez, \textit{Chained Eagle}, 226.
The POWs proudly reported the results of the Church Riot after their repatriation. Thorsness said, “From that Sunday on until we came home, we held a church service.”\(^{162}\) Alvarez wrote, “From the following Sunday, the faithful in each room conducted church services, praying and singing hymns together. Individuals appointed by the senior ranking officer gave pep talks instead of sermons.”\(^{163}\) Their exhilaration over their victory is still tangible after fifty years.

The prisoners finally knew how to sway the Camp Authority, yet they continued to use their clout only for matters of religious freedom. Claude Clower was the SRO in a room with a nine-man choir. The guards warned him that if the choir did not quit singing, they would “be ‘punished,’ which is the way the V had for saying, ‘We’re going to torture you.’”\(^{164}\) Clower informed his choir members of this threat and said,

> “I do not want to tell you to continue, but I think it is best, although each and every one of you may be tortured. Now, if any of you wants to stop, I don’t want you to be influenced. I will not feel badly about it one way or the other.” And, to a man, each one of them said, “If I am pulled about this, and then tortured about this, I would feel it an honor.”\(^{165}\)

Some men were pulled from the room, but the choir continued. Clower affirmed, “I think they knew good and well we were going down to the last man.”\(^{166}\) Gaither’s cell was allowed to have four members in its choir, but he joked, “We made a point not to count


\(^{164}\) Rowan, \textit{They Wouldn’t Let Us Die}, 45.

\(^{165}\) Ibid.

\(^{166}\) Ibid.
Eventually the Camp Authority would permit a choir of eight to ten men to lead the service and rehearse during the week. With the prisoners constantly pushing back against the VN’s regulations, the church services continued to grow in size, complexity, and quality. The next chapter will examine the musical and religious rituals established over the last few years of the war.

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Chapter Six

Conducting Church in a Prison Cell

These were a tremendous source of strength for me. You can pray personally and stuff like that, but it was surely nice to have a couple of guys sing songs with you. We really felt strongly about having services. I think religious training is very important because it became a great source of strength up there. It was obvious no one else could help us, but God could. We had a lot of peace up there. Personally, I was a lot more peaceful and happier than any time previously in my life.

– Anonymous POW, Just a Closer Walk

Many POWs remember their time in Camp Unity with fondness. They could engage in new activities and form new relationships. They could play chess without tapping their moves through the wall to their opponent. Most important to some prisoners were the “great spiritual experiences” they shared. Larry Chesley professed “a great affection for every man in that large room,” but he formed a special bond with his cellmate Jay Jensen because they “were of the same faith, had the same concepts of God, had the same basic beliefs.” Regardless of their individual beliefs, with church now part of their routine, “everyone benefited from the worship services.” Each cell block featured a choir and, according to Rutledge, “on an average Sunday one could hear hymns of praise echoing through that entire prison complex.”

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3 Larry Chesley, Seven Years in Hanoi: A POW Tells His Story (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, Inc., 1973), 88.


5 Rutledge, In the Presence, 88.
The format and content of a service was determined by the cell’s religious leader. Though no officially ordained chaplains had been captured, several prisoners had backgrounds as deacons, sextons, or other ministerial positions in their home churches.6 These men were often called upon to serve as a “Wing Chaplain.” Jim Sehorn, Charlie Plumb, and Charles Gillespie each filled that role in their unit.7 Robert Certain was planning to attend seminary after release, so he was the natural choice for his room’s chaplain.8 Since no one in his cell was prepared to give sermons, Chesley filled the role in an “educational rather than spiritual” manner.9 In Ray Alcorn’s building, the responsibility was passed among any cellmates who desired to participate. Then the preacher of the day would “present whatever Bible verses he could remember along with a ‘sermon.’”10

Some buildings had more formal, ritualistic affairs, while others “would just have a service where if somebody knew some prayers they would say it, if somebody knew some hymns, we would sing it.”11 Most services would follow the pattern of the Protestant chapels, beginning with hymns followed by prayer, scripture, more hymns, and a sermon.12 Occasionally the Catholic prisoners would conduct the services according to

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6 Ralph Galati, telephone interview by author, September 5, 2014.
8 Certain, The Final Flight, 86.
9 Chesley, Seven Years in Hanoi, 89.
10 Ray Alcorn, e-mail message to author, August 30, 2015.
11 Galati, interview.
12 Chesley, Seven Years in Hanoi, 89.
their customs. Keeping with the tradition of their early church services in solitary, each Sunday’s meeting would either start or end with the Pledge of Allegiance and a patriotic song.

Without Bibles, hymnbooks, or training, the POWs managed to throw together a respectable ceremony. Norm McDaniel claimed, “Using our memory to reconstruct the order of activities of a church service, we were successful in holding the liturgy in almost the same fashion as it is performed in our churches, and some of the services were as good as the best I’ve witnessed anywhere.” Mulligan’s building performed a proper ecumenical church service:

It was a thoroughly planned affair under the guidance of Colonel Norman Gaddis who acted as our Chaplain. We sang an entrance hymn, said the Pledge of Allegiance followed by readings from a Bible, and a prepared homily given by one of the nine of us who had volunteered to accept this assignment. We rotated the homily duty each week. We broke bread and took Communion using water in place of wine. We meditated and said a Communal Prayer before we sang the final closing hymn.

The officers in Rawhide could not conduct such lavish services, as they were still in leg stocks in tiny rooms. Still the nine men continued their covert worship through the walls until the war ended. Beginning with the Pledge of Allegiance and a patriotic hymn, they would “recite prayers which were common to both the Protestant and Catholic faiths – prayers such as the Our Father and the Apostle’s [sic] Creed.”

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14 Chesley, *Seven Years in Hanoi*, 89.


communion once a month, using bits of rice or bread from their meal. They also held a daily mass without any music, but they pined for Sunday when Jack Finley, “a tremendous whistler,” would serenade them. Robbie Risner said, “I can still hear the beautiful clear notes of ‘The Lord’s Prayer’ or ‘Ave Maria.’”\textsuperscript{18}

For prisoners in all locations, the lack of Bibles remained a point of contention. Lee Ellis reported, “We constantly asked for a Bible, but the V, who were terrified of religion, always denied having any. We suspected — and later learned — that our families had sent stacks of them.”\textsuperscript{19} The fight for scriptural access took longer, but the men eventually won this battle. The prisoners in punishment cells and camps would still be denied, but the VN set up a system to occasionally allow POWs in the larger cells a short time with their holy book. James Ray noted that “for five weeks out of the six years one prisoner was allowed to see a Bible one hour per week for copying.”\textsuperscript{20} While that prisoner attempted to copy, “the interrogator would plant his elbow on the Bible for the first fifteen minutes,” and then try to distract him with “mundane questions.”\textsuperscript{21} The scribe was required to return his work from the previous week before he could copy any additional scripture, so the POWs spent all week memorizing verses.\textsuperscript{22}

Plumb’s building was fortunate enough to get unfettered access to a Bible for 36 hours straight. As chaplain, he established teams of two to copy adjoining pages around

\textsuperscript{18} Robinson Risner, \textit{The Passing of the Night: My Seven Years as a Prisoner of the North Vietnamese} (Duncanville, TX: World Wide Printing, 1999), 207.


\textsuperscript{20} Wyatt, \textit{We Came Home}, 434.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
the clock. While the 57 men in his room jostled each other for a chance to touch the book, Plumb “was especially happy to see the three atheists among the first to lay their hands on the opened pages.”23 Eugene McDaniel noticed the atheists and agnostics in his building also wanted to read the Bible, “some, of course, only to argue the points about the existence of God — but many of them to grab onto something that could give hope.”24 His cell immediately copied the complete book of Matthew, which contains “favorites such as the Sermon on the Mount and the Christmas story.”25 Ralph Gaither, with his photographic mind, memorized the entire book in case the men could never again access a Bible.

McDaniel recalled the prisoners arguing over the copied scripture, so they “finally had to post a reading list for the Bible, each man taking a certain time; some men had to get up at three A.M. to get their turn, but they never missed.”26 As a bonus, the scripture recitation in their church services became scripture reading, and they were able to correct any verses they learned incorrectly while in prison. In the homemade Bibles they had made over the years, “few verses were accurate word for word and many were out of order, but the basic meanings were there.”27


25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., 100.

The Music Man

For one or two tries I attempted to sing the very complex harmonies composed by Quincy Collins. I found I could not stay on my part with the other parts in my ears, so, in the interest of good music (and it was good), I quit and enjoyed listening.

– Peter R Schoeffel28

The sermons and scripture readings were inspirational, but the music portion of the services allowed everyone to get involved and reminded them of their unity. They could draw strength from God and each other while reveling in the knowledge that they had won the chance to sing together. The choir in some cells was simply a group of men spontaneously singing whatever hymns they knew, while other cells featured an ensemble of highly trained vocalists led by a talented conductor. Dick Francis experienced the former, saying “I don’t recall anyone leading the music... just all of us singing the words if we knew them.”29

The POWs who had the better choirs wrote about them with pride. Lee Ellis remembered that his cell’s service was “complete with a choir of eight guys who actually could sing.”30 Gene Smith noted, “The choir in those cells, some were better than others. But the one right next door to us in cell 2 had a great choir. We thought ours was better than theirs.”31 James Mulligan proclaimed that Building Seven “had a polished choir which sang all the church service hymns in harmony and on key.”32 Howie Dunn, who

28 Peter Schoeffel, e-mail message to author, September 2, 2015.
29 Dick Francis, e-mail message to author, August 31, 2015.
30 Ellis, Leading with Honor, 122.
31 Gene Smith, telephone interview by author, August 28, 2015.
32 Mulligan, The Hanoi Commitment, 277.
led that choir, was “quite professional as a director” and wrote out harmony for the six men. Edward Mechenbier praised his cell’s choir director, writing that “Jack Tomes was The Voice.” Ray Alcorn boasted that his choir “became pretty damned good,” and admitted that a competition of sorts developed between the choirs as they sang loud enough for other cells to hear.

With so much talent in Camp Unity, Quincy Collins still stood out for his musical abilities. He had been the first protestant choir director at the Air Force Academy and played saxophone professionally. In prison, he rehearsed his 12-man choir every night behind the latrine partition so that by Sunday they “were in pretty good shape to sing, and to sing in a very organized harmonic fashion.” Even the prisoners who “had no use for church” would come together on Sunday morning to listen, and then say, “You know, the guys in that god-damned glee club sounded really good.”

The “Music Man” was mentioned by almost every POW interviewed for this study. Gobel James said, “Singing in Quincy Collins’ church and entertainment choirs provided a great outlet for frustrations and was a great emotional support. It gave us something to look forward to and helped to pass the time.” Jim Sehorn wrote, “Quincy

33 Bob Shumaker, e-mail message to author, August 27, 2015.
35 Alcorn, e-mail message to author.
38 Gobel James, e-mail message to author, February 26, 2016.
and the choir’s patriotic selections were great reminders of reasons to ‘Hang In There.’”

Norm McDaniel stated,

Quincy’s musical talent, creativity, and resourcefulness made him well known among the prisoners. His efforts to gladden their hearts and lighten the burdens of prison life by providing music and leading singing groups created lasting memories. Music has always been one of the major ways Christians have spread their Gospel of good news, expressed happiness and praise, received strength, and realized communion with our Lord.

McDaniel recalled that Collins would “spend day after day arranging music, copying music from memory, or verifying harmony. Without the aid of a musical instrument, the task was indeed difficult.” When asked if composing without an instrument was complicated, Collins replied,

No, very simple. First thing you do is, if you’re writing an arrangement. For instance, I did a Four Freshmen arrangement. I knew the melody, so I decide on what key I’m gonna write it in. Then I know, in my triads, where that melody starts, so I’m writing the melody first, with the rhythm, the whole bit. Then I write the tenor, which is easy to do, because you’re just a third above or whatever. And I’d try to get some modernistic chords in there every now and then. And the bass was easy, because I think bass. And then I would think about the baritone, and what would make this sound like a more full chord. So that wasn’t that difficult.

If the lack of an instrument couldn’t stop him, then a lack of paper and writing utensils was hardly an inconvenience. John Fer explained how Collins would use the toilet paper, which “came in big sheets about 2 foot square…. Quincy would take the 2x2 sheets and write his music on it with homemade ink.” The ink was created from

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39 Jim Sehorn, e-mail message to author, September 12, 2015.


41 Ibid.

42 Collins, interview.

cigarette ashes, roof tile dust, or diarrhea pills. He used a fishbone from his soup as a pen. The toilet paper was thick and coarse like cardboard, with “pieces of wood in it.” Collins was able to bring some of his music home, and the toilet paper has remained intact for fifty years (see fig. 6.1). On the bottom corner of the sheet music, Collins would provide a checklist to make sure each other building received and copied it. In the case of this example, Room Three obtained the music, but Rooms Four and Seven did not. Passing any materials between cells was difficult and carried inherent risks.

Figure 6.1. Example of Sheet Music Written on Toilet Paper by Quincy Collins in Vietnam Prison Camp. Source: Quincy Collins.

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44 Ibid.; Collins, interview.
45 Collins, interview.
46 Bill Metzger, e-mail message to author, September 7, 2015.
Collins faced other obstacles to his composition. Getting caught by the guards was a very real danger, so he had to write covertly. He reported, “I did this at night, underneath a bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling, and I just about went blind. And sometimes I’d do it under the mosquito net, because you couldn’t exist without it. So I’d be doing this for hours.” In addition, he continued to face backlash from some other prisoners for excessive rehearsals. John McCain wrote, “I thought they were quite good, excellent, in fact. Although I confess that the regularity with which they practiced in the weeks prior to Christmas occasionally grated on my nerves.” Collins admitted, “We know everybody didn’t like listening to a rehearsal, so it irritated some of our own people, but not that much. I went ahead with it.”

Of course, the POWs did not have a piano or any way to check their pitches, other than a metal cup that, “when thumped, gave off a b-flat sound.” Since pitch was relative in this environment, Collins “could’ve written all this stuff in the key of C, and it wouldn’t have made any difference,” as long as they sang in the right key and used the right intervals. However, Collins was “a purist.” He “wanted it to be in the right key.” Sometimes after performing a piece, he realized the key was too high or low, and then he would have the singers adjust. The example below shows “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” originally written in G major, with a note saying, “Should be higher” (see fig. 6.2).

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48 Collins, interview.


50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.
Figure 6.2. Example of Sheet Music Composed in Vietnam by Quincy Collins and Transcribed at Clark Air Force Base. Source: Quincy Collins.
After his release, while other POWs were being debriefed, Collins was sitting with a member of the Air Force Band, putting all his music on paper. The complexity of his arrangements, with up to five flats in the key signature and up to six-part harmony, is almost as surprising as the fact that he remembered every pitch and rhythm of thirty-five songs up to seven years after he composed them. His repertory included arrangements of old hymns and spirituals, patriotic songs, and the songs and hymns for every military branch. He also composed an original Christmas carol, the Air Force Academy Hymn, and love songs for his wife. For a list of songs composed by Quincy Collins in Hanoi, see Appendix F, and for examples of his compositions, see Appendix G.

One piece of music written by Quincy Collins in Vietnam was later performed at the White House. After years in prison, the Vietnamese gave Collins his first letter from home in 1971. This correspondence alerted him that his father had passed away. He was in solitary confinement in the Skid Row punishment camp at the time, and he mourned in silence. Though he could not sing or conduct his choir anymore, he still depended on his faith and music to get him through the pain. He decided, “We need a song, our song.”

He worked on the hymn of prayerful petition and praise, giving it “a marching cadence, sort of like ‘Onward Christian Soldiers.’” His words “professed the feeling of our men” in prison (see ex. 6.1).

54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
56 Wyatt, We Came Home, 587.
Example 6.1. Quincy Collins, “POW Hymn”

POW Hymn

Quincy Collins

Tenor I

Tenor II

Baritone

Bass

O God to thee we raise this prayer and sing, from within these foreign prison walls, We’re men who wear the gold and silver wings, and proudly heed our nation’s
Example 6.1. Quincy Collins, “POW Hymn,” continued

call. Give us strength to with-stand all the harm that the hand of our

en-e-my cap-tors can do. To in-du-e. We pledge un-swerv-ing faith and

loy-al-ty to our cause, A-me-ri-ca and Thee, A-men!
After repatriation, “The POW Hymn” was performed by a thirty-five-member choir of POWs on May 24, 1973, for President Nixon and the largest ever seated dinner at the White House. Collins conducted the men, some of whom he had never met before, in front of over 1300 guests and numerous celebrities like Bob Hope and John Wayne. Collins was thrilled with the performance and said the choir’s “passion and enthusiasm about being home showed in their voices.” He beamed when he told how Nixon “jumped up on the stage when it was over, grabbed me by the tail of my outfit, and wanted to congratulate me and the choir for our participation” (see fig. 6.3). Other POWs also wrote songs for worship, but none of them attempted to notate the music in prison. Norm McDaniel wrote “God Is My Pilot,” an original song, in 1966. The lyrics show how he relied on his faith during hardship. This is the chorus:

God is my pilot so I have no fear,
For the love of God will never disappear.
In life and in death, and through eternity
He’ll be with me.

Since he had no writing materials, McDaniel composed by “originating one line, mentally storing it, and adding other lines while being careful not to forget those previously constructed.” No sheet music or recordings of McDaniel’s songs appear to exist, but he claimed to have written numerous religious and love songs in prison.

57 Ibid., 590.
59 Ibid.
60 McDaniel, Yet Another Voice, 39.
61 Ibid., 38.
62 Ibid.
Although the original compositions stand out in the prison environment, the traditional, established songs were most common in the POWs’ church services. Larry Chesley noted, “The hymns we sang were frequently the well-known ones, the hymns Christians have sung for a century or two. They were always uplifting.”63 He recalled the verse that Gene Smith and Mo Baker added to “How Great Thou Art” as designed specifically for their circumstances.64 Immediately after a service containing the song,

63 Chesley, Seven Years in Hanoi, 89.

64 Ibid.
Baker had suggested, “Gene, let’s write a verse to that thing about how God has sustained us while we’ve been up here.”⁶⁵ Within thirty minutes, the men wrote the following words (see ex. 6.2).⁶⁶


Another remarkable songwriter was Peter Schoeffel. As an atheist, he admitted that his participation in many aspects of the church services “consisted only in respectful silence.”⁶⁷ When he did contribute, it was out of a “desire to foster group morale.” He explained, “I took part in services and demonstrations in support of them not for any support of religion, but only to support the protest that we were being deprived of a right

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⁶⁵ Smith, interview.

⁶⁶ Mo Baker, e-mail message to author, September 16, 2015.

⁶⁷ Schoeffel, e-mail message to author.
guaranteed by the Geneva Conventions.” 68 For someone with no interest in religion, he made an unexpected choice during a stretch in solitary confinement in 1969 – he wrote three additional verses to the Navy hymn, “Eternal Father, Strong to Save” (see ex. 6.3). 69 While looking for anything to occupy his mind, he thought of the hymn and realized, “There are verses which cover the mariner, one slanted toward flying, and one for those in peril on the ground.” 70 Schoeffel decided another verse was needed for those in space. After writing this, another POW challenged him to write a verse referring to the prisoners of war. This man who did not believe in God wrote three powerful verses which his religious cellmates could sing out in prayer. 71

68 Ibid.

69 Lee Humiston et al., Voices from the Dark: A Collection of Poems Written in the Cells of Hanoi, Viet Nam and Peking, China (South Portland, ME: Maine Military Museum, 2007), 23.

70 Ibid., 22.

71 Ibid., 23.
Example 6.3. Peter Schoeffel, “Eternal Father”

Eternal Father
(Additional Verses)

1. Oh Lord, the hope of men in chains, Who know-eth all the prisoner's pains. In ancient times Thy sword's bright flame, Hath laid the tyrant

2. Oh Thou, whose stars in countless flight with awesome splendor fill the night, The saving power of Thy love is boundless as the call Thy name to send us from this

3. Oh Lord, the hope of men in chains, Thou know-est all the prisoner's pains. Again Thy people
Example 6.3. Peter Schoeffel, “Eternal Father,” continued

In addition to the songs composed in prison, the music used in the POWs’ church services consisted mostly of “the old standbys,” the “traditional Protestant hymns,” the “standard songs” that everyone would know. Cecil Brunson, who led the church service in his cellblock, stated, “I would have had to have known all the words to at least one verse.” “Amazing Grace” was sung regularly because “everybody knew the song, and after a while, somebody would remember all the words.” Without hymnals, the

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72 Shumaker, e-mail message to author.

73 Galati, interview.

74 Francis, e-mail message to author.

75 Brunson, interview.

76 Galati, interview.
prisoners were restricted to what they could remember, and they remembered the music they learned as children and the hymns they had sung most regularly.

When asked which songs they sang in their prison church services, the POWs most commonly answered “The Lord’s Prayer,” “The Old Rugged Cross,” “In the Garden,” and “Eternal Father,” along with a litany of patriotic songs. (A full list of songs reportedly used in worship in the prison camps of Vietnam can be found in Appendix D.) Since many of the POWs did not know the songs, the worship leader would write the words on pieces of toilet paper with lead rocks or homemade ink.77 Another category of religious music the POWs mentioned often was Christmas music.

**Homesick on Christmas**

In my cell that day, I was astounded to realize how unaware I had been of the real meaning of Christmas on those days so long ago. Oh, I knew it was Christ’s birthday and I knew He was God’s Son – Someone very special. That was nice, but it took prison to help me to see what Christmas really meant. All the world was a prison, and every man a prisoner until He came. On that night two thousand years ago, God had invaded my world. Like Colonel Bull Simons and his brave group of seventy, God came down to search out and rescue prisoners. He would risk His life to break open prison doors. He would die to set men free. Christmas Day would be the beginning of freedom for men who would believe. I spent that day thinking of the freedom I felt in Christ and wishing to be free to celebrate His birth again with my family.

– Howard Rutledge, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies*78

The holiday season is typically a time of joy and celebration, but spending it locked up on the other side of the world, not knowing if your family is waiting for you, not knowing if you would ever see them again, was a dismal reality for the prisoners of war. Jim Stockdale admitted, “Being frank and truthful with myself on this second

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77 Brunson, interview.

78 Rutledge, *In the Presence*, 74-75.
Christmas Eve alone up there, I have to say that, for me, in this isolation, holiday thoughts can be an abomination, a self-flagellation.”\footnote{Stockdale, In Love & War, 187.} Realizing that his cell closely resembled the “barren manger in Bethlehem,” Jim Mulligan attempted to encourage the prisoners near him by tapping, “Remember at Christmas as we celebrate the rebirth of Christ that upon our release, we also will be born again into a free world, better men than when we came here. God bless! Happy Christmas!”\footnote{Alvin Townley, Defiant: The POWs Who Endured Vietnam’s Most Infamous Prison, the Women Who Fought for Them, and the One Who Never Returned (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2014), 132.} Simple messages like these were the lifeblood for the men when they lived alone.

Stockdale and Sam Johnson tried to lift each other’s spirits, but “humor and friendship could not prevent the onset of depression. At Christmastime, melancholy and despondency rolled into the cells like a thick fog.”\footnote{Ibid., 134.} Homesickness plagued the POWs throughout December. Bud Day recalled, “The sound of Christmas was too deeply touching to all of us, too bittersweet. It was too reminiscent of shining children’s faces, of church and Christmas music, of holiday greetings from friends, turkey, pumpkin pie, Santa Claus, snow crystals painting a new white world, large red stockings on the hearth.”\footnote{George Day, Return with Honor (Mesa, Arizona: Champlin Fighter Museum Press, 1989), 108.}

Many POWs connected certain Christmas carols with especially difficult times in prison. Bud Day wrote that the first Christmas carol of 1967 “was a poignant moment, a
knife in the throat,” making him and his cellmates choked up and emotional. Everett Alvarez recollected a similar situation:

One morning we were singing carols in low voices, each of us lost in memories of Christmas at home as we tried hard to put some cheer into the words and melody. We were in the middle of Silver Bells when Tom choked up. He started to sob. It was a particularly meaningful carol to him and it was his first Christmas away from home. “Don’t worry, Tom, we’ll stop. We won’t sing for a while.” I remembered how hard it had been for me the previous year to be alone at Christmas, so far from home.

Gerald Coffee likewise wrote, “Once in awhile I could hear another prisoner whistling a Christmas carol — one that I hadn’t remembered since I was a child. It would bring back memories that really hurt.” Ray Alcorn still had an emotional reaction to “Silent Night” almost fifty years after his original response in prison. He wrote, “I have trouble hearing or singing it today without a tear or two. (My face is a little damp right now).”

Stockdale remembered a Christmas in Alcatraz when all of the prisoners were “quiet and subdued, consumed with longings for family and friends.” The loudspeaker outside his cell was playing a “haunting tune called ‘Till’ by an American piano player named Roger Williams,” when a guard unlocked his cell and presented him with a letter. That letter, alerting him to his mother’s death, had been held for months and delivered expressly on Christmas night, achieving the maximum emotional effect. The

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83 Ibid.
86 Alcorn, e-mail message to author.
87 Stockdale, In Love & War, 286.
music that played at this moment was etched forever in his memory. He wrote, ‘‘Till’’ was still coming out of the outdoor speaker and suddenly seemed so appropriate as I said farewell to dear old mom. On that Christmas Night, 1968, I stood there in my leg irons and wept.**88**

In the early years of the war, the Christmas holiday was commandeered by the Vietnamese for a barrage of propaganda. The prisoners performed holiday concerts for the press and visited churches for the cameras, all to prove the “humane and lenient” treatment they were receiving despite their “crimes.” The POWs, in turn, used these events to spread information among the camps. The Christmas music used as propaganda will be explored in depth in Part III. The current section will focus on the Christmas celebrations and services of the prisoners that were not sanctioned by Vietnam.

**Party Time**

That Christmas we had a big celebration. It was amazing what the POWs could come up with in the way of costumes. We made reindeer, sang Christmas carols, and enjoyed skits. Our morale was good during 1971 and it was a good time for us, as good as it could be under the circumstances.

– George Hall, *Commitment to Honor*89

The early Christmases in isolation were miserable, but those memories made celebrating Christmas together in the later years much more exciting. Although the men still pined for home and their families, they discovered many ways to celebrate the holiday and each other. They threw parties, gave gifts, and put on imaginative shows for their cellmates. Robert Jones, however, cautioned that “all or most of these games, gifts,

**88** Ibid., 290.

**89** George R. Hall and Pat Hall, *Commitment to Honor: A Prisoner of War Remembers Vietnam*, (Jackson, MS: Franklin Printers, 2005), 112.
shows, etc., were illegal, and therefore had to be constructed and carried out covertly.”  

Except for those events intended for propaganda, the POWs never had supplies for their festivities. They were limited to whatever materials they could scrounge up and their “Yankee ingenuity.”  

To throw a party, the POWs needed to decorate their cells, but whenever decorations were discovered, the guards would remove them. Most cells would hide their trimmings during the day and enjoy them at night, or wait to put them out until Christmas Day. Each cell’s décor varied according to the resources and talents available. Some cells had rather primitive trees, such as the one made from olive green mosquito net and bits of colored paper in Dogpatch. In Camp Unity, the men in Room Four pasted green socks to the wall to look like a tree. They added bits of paper for ornaments and whitewash paste for snow. Nels Tanner collected leaves from outside and made wreaths by bending sticks in a circle. Ted Ballard made a tree from a “small swiss-type broom with strips of cloth and paper with various designs.”  

Some POWs were accomplished artists, and their cells were adorned with impressive Yuletide displays. Mike McGrath used his black shirt as a backdrop for an

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90 Wyatt, We Came Home, 291.

91 Ibid.

92 Shirley Downing, “Christmas ’72 Was Time of Hope for Prisoners” Commercial Appeal (Memphis), n.d.


94 Downing, “Christmas ’72 Was Time of Hope.”

95 Ibid.

96 Ibid.

97 Ballard, “The Traditional One-String Instrument.”
illustrated tree. He used paper and cloth to craft stars and ornaments and attached tiny
packages with the name of each cellmate. The guards confiscated his creation and took
McGrath to interrogation. The officers said they “were impressed with his art and were
going to take it to the museum.” He grabbed the shirt and ripped it in pieces, yelling “No,
you are not!”

Danny Glenn was a gifted artist with a background in architecture. When Charlie
Plumb asked Glenn to put a nativity scene on the wall, he “had no idea of the
possibilities,” but Glenn “created a masterpiece that could have been shown in the Louvre
or El Prado.” He made a paintbrush from his hair and a bamboo stick and created all his
paints from scratch:

Everything was improvised. He carried in bricks from outside and sampled them
by color – from off-white to purple. He then ground the bricks into dust, and by
adding ash or scrapings of paint, he found he could manufacture nearly any color
in the spectrum. For blue, he scraped off residue from a toothpaste tube. Grinding
bricks hour after hour for several weeks, he collected enough dust for his
project.

As he painted over the span of two months, the prisoners hid his work with
hanging clothes. He outlined three large church windows on the wall, placing Jesus,
Mary, and Joseph in the center. The other panels featured the shepherds and the Magi.
Plumb exclaimed, “Shadows were made from various shades of ashes. Rays of starlight
broke up the grays with white and yellow…. The details were exquisite. Mary’s smile
paralleled da Vinci’s La Gioconda.” Unfortunately, a guard peeked in on Christmas

98 Ibid.

99 Plumb, I’m No Hero, 244.

100 Ibid.

101 Ibid.
Eve and saw the mural. An officer ran into the room and shouted, “That are not allowed! You destroy now or you severely punish!” The POWs mournfully poured buckets of water on Glenn’s magnum opus, forced to once again have a “simple Christmas.” An example of Glenn’s ability can be seen in Figure 6.4, a painting of his family and carolers appropriated by the camp officials and taken to the peace negotiations as proof that the prisoners were treated well.


Decorations set the mood, but without gifts under the tree, it did not seem like Christmas. Exchanging gifts was a tradition in the POW camps, even though they had no money or access to materials. Some men gave gifts of the “gag variety,” while others

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102 Ibid., 246.
103 Ibid.
105 Wyatt, We Came Home, 291.
came up with thoughtful or sentimental presents. Ralph Gaither made a rosary from
turkey bones, aluminum, and blanket string for George Coker. Coker wrote a lengthy
poem for Gaither, who treasured it.\textsuperscript{106} Some cells used the Secret Santa method, having
each man draw a name from a hat. Ray Vohden received a homemade traveling bag
embellished with AA (for American Airlines), because they were “hoping to get out
soon.”\textsuperscript{107}

When the prisoners were unable to find supplies, or when they were in individual
cells, they still had Christmas parties. Dale Doss recalled, “In my room, we were
awakened at dawn by [a POW dressed as] Santa Claus, who passed out slips of paper
with presents written on them, a good gift and a funny gift.”\textsuperscript{108} The prisoners were
expected to send the good gift to their cellmate the Christmas after release. When they
were separated by walls, the prisoners had to get creative. At the Zoo, the POWs in one
cellblock planned an extravagant party where each man was assigned a specialty. He
would then give all the details of the food, music, etc. to his comrades by tapping through
the wall. These men exchanged imaginary gifts at their imaginary party.\textsuperscript{109}

A tradition in every camp was to make Christmas cards for other buildings. These
were signed by every man in the cell and then “‘air-mailed’ by tying a rock to the paper
and throwing them” across the courtyards.\textsuperscript{110} The prisoners used bread dough to paste

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\textsuperscript{106} Humiston, \textit{Voices from the Dark}, 47.
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\textsuperscript{107} Downing, “Christmas ‘72 Was Time of Hope.”
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\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.
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\textsuperscript{109} Coffee, \textit{Beyond Survival}, 212.
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\textsuperscript{110} Ballard, “The Traditional One-String Instrument.”
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sheets of toilet paper together, and the artwork was all created with homemade paints.\textsuperscript{111} Some of these cards contained poems and songs written by POWs, some of which were sentimental and nostalgic and others which focused on humor (see fig. 6.5).

![Christmas Card Featuring “The Twelve Days of Christmas” Parody, Created by Prisoners of War in Hanoi, Vietnam. Source: Naval Aviation Museum, Pensacola, FL.](image)

**Figure 6.5.** Christmas Card Featuring “The Twelve Days of Christmas” Parody, Created by Prisoners of War in Hanoi, Vietnam. Source: Naval Aviation Museum, Pensacola, FL.

**Christmas Pageants**

We had plays, skits, musicals, speeches, movies, puppet shows, and choral performances, complete with costumes, sets, sound effects, curtain, and stage.  
– Robert Jones, *We Came Home*\textsuperscript{112}

For a group of men who managed to create paintings without paint, producing a play with no resources inside their cells was not an insurmountable task. The POWs were

\textsuperscript{111} Downing, “Christmas ‘72 Was Time of Hope.”

\textsuperscript{112} Wyatt, *We Came Home*, 291.
so creative with the little they had that the camp officials “couldn’t believe their eyes” as they watched a Christmas skit through the windows in Camp Unity.\footnote{Chesley, \textit{Seven Years in Hanoi}, 79.} Each cell had its own celebrations, so the plays were only performed for those in the same building. Although the audience was only fifty or so men, the POWs presented a spectacle. By stealing bits of cotton, Jerry Marvel “managed to approximate a Santa Claus costume” to entertain his cell. Three other prisoners crafted women’s clothing from rags for their skit “in which three virgins were sacrificed to a volcano, which threw them back.”\footnote{Norman, \textit{Bouncing Back}, 203.} Paul Schulz remembered performing a skit in German for Christmas of 1969,\footnote{Paul Schulz, e-mail message to author, September 6, 2015.} and after the choir sang carols in 1971, Ted Ballard and five other “non-singers put on a skit imitating the choir.”\footnote{Ballard, “The Traditional One-String Instrument.”} The most celebrated play was an adaptation of \textit{A Christmas Carol} which was “sheer delight” for everyone.\footnote{Day, \textit{Return with Honor}, 229.} The Hanoi Players’ “mangled production” “livened up the venerable tale with parody, most of it vulgar, to the great amusement of [their] howling audience.”\footnote{McCain, \textit{Faith of My Fathers}, 331.} Bud Day exclaimed,

Scrooge was meaner than a barrel of snakes. Tiny Tim and Bob Cratchett, the poor overworked bookkeeper, were more pathetic than ever. Tim was sick from worms, diarrhea, and beri-beri. Ghosts flittered about in white mosquito nets, and the POW dialogue was the greatest shot in the arm I had during confinement. It was the first time I had laughed hard, long, and loud in more than four years.\footnote{Day, \textit{Return with Honor}, 229.}
John McCain played Scrooge with a “cotton lamb-chop beard,” a contorted face, and an overdramatic flair which showcased “his cocky, party-animal side in full splendor.”

Representing the diarrhea-plagued Tiny Tim, Jack Fellowes hobbled around in a diaper. Orson Swindle produced the skit and played the roles of Christmas Past, Present, and Future. As Christmas Future warned Scrooge about his impending doom, McCain and Swindle stood over the latrine bucket depicting a tombstone. Tiny Tim’s incessant need to use the bucket interrupted the dialogue multiple times.

While the secular skits provided a much-needed release through humor, music remained the focal point of the holiday season. Religious and secular carols intermingled in a single worship service or performance. One hundred percent of the POWs interviewed for this study celebrated Christmas with music, whether in a formal situation or an impromptu session. Some cells spent months preparing and others simply stood together and sang what they could remember. The permission to gather and sing was never guaranteed, so the productions were limited by the Camp Authority and often disrupted by the guards. While Danny Glenn had painted his mural, Charlie Plumb had written four-part harmony for a variety of carols. While the artwork was washed from the wall, the guards searched the cell and took everything they had prepared for Christmas, including the prisoners’ gifts and Plumb’s sheet music.

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121 Ibid.

Quincy Collins had a similar experience which landed him in Skid Row and inspired him to memorialize the “Grinch Who Tried to Steal Christmas.”\(^{123}\) He recalled,

> We were coming up on Christmas, and I started writing music three or four months out, because it’d take me that long. Once I got it on paper, then I’d have to teach it to the choir, and make changes if necessary, and then I’d get the music back, and I’d have to store it. So I was in the midst of that, and Christmas was about three days away, and the Gooks came in on a surprise inspection.\(^{124}\)

Collins had planned ahead for this possibility, so he quickly handed his music to several cellmates who stuffed pages into their pajama pants. The prisoners were marched out of the cell while the guards searched, so Collins thought, “Whew! We’ve escaped another one.”\(^{125}\) However, the guards then ordered the POWs to disrobe, leaving them “naked as jaybirds.” The music fell out and the guards burned all of it in front of them.

Collins was forlorn and cried out to God, “Lord, don’t let them do this to us. What can I do to make this thing right, so that we can carry on our Christmas service?” He realized he could write the first and last four measures of each song and then singers could improvise on the middle. Since they had rehearsed many times, the choir knew the words already. Collins spent every minute writing and had time for a last-minute rehearsal.

As their Christmas service began, Collins warned the choir to keep it down. They began with “Joy to the World,” at first singing quietly, but Collins quickly lost control. He recalled, “As we kept going, they just kept getting louder. I’m trying to hold them down. Pretty soon, their eyes are like this, their blood vessels are straining and they’re

\(^{123}\) Collins, interview.

\(^{124}\) Ibid.

\(^{125}\) Ibid.
pumping out “Joy to the World,” and the ladders hit the side of the buildings.” The guards thrust their guns through the bars of the windows and held up their hand grenades. Collins saw the English-speaking guard, who he called “the dumbass who’s always after me.” The Music Man smiled and held up his sheet music for the guard to see. Collins felt his prayers were answered when the guard “shook his head, and they went down and didn’t bother us. And we had one of the most meaningful Christmas services I’ve ever attended. I mean, there wasn’t a dry eye in the place. And God was right there with us. We just said, the Grinch is not gonna do this to us.”

The following year (1971), Room Three avoided conflict by inviting the Camp Commander and all the guards to attend their Christmas pageant. They climbed on boxes and watched through the windows. The POWs “told the Christmas story in song” in a program over an hour in length. Their grand finale was “O Holy Night,” sung by all forty men in the room. Mo Baker raved, “At the end, the room fell silent. Then, the Vietnamese captors cheered and clapped in an unexpected ovation. Music had bridged a gap that was half-a-world wide.” The applauding audience included Rat, “the officer clearly capable of sadism.”

Charlie Plumb and Danny Glenn had a run-in with Rat over their Christmas presentation in 1972. Plumb wanted Glenn to once again utilize his artistic talent, this time by creating a slide show. The two experimented with a homemade lamp and multiple pieces of paper before realizing they needed slides of at least eight by twelve

126 Ibid.

127 Mo Baker, e-mail message to author.

128 Plumb, I’m No Hero, 248.
inches. They made a projection tube out of tarpaper and rigged a flap controlled by a string. Glenn crafted slides to correspond with certain carols. Plumb explained, “The first song would be ‘O Little Town of Bethlehem,’ and Danny would raise the flap to show a cutout skyline of Bethlehem. While prisoners would sing, ‘Yet in thy dark street shineth the everlasting light,’ Danny would raise the flap further to reveal the guiding star.”

The men practiced for several weeks, but right before Christmas, Rat discovered their handiwork. “What’s this?” he asked. “You know if break regulation you be severely punish!” The two prisoners pleaded with him to leave them alone for one night. They attempted to demonstrate the slides for him, but the daylight made it impossible to see. However, Plumb proclaimed, “Since he knew that the war was all but over, that his capital city was being bombed, and that our projector and slides were harmless, he consented to our pleas.” Without Rat bothering them, they performed for two packed audiences – “Christians, Jews, atheists, everyone except the V.” The camaraderie experienced the year before no longer existed as the bombs fell at the door of their captors.

Whether they were in large or small cells, with many roommates or none, the POWs reported they celebrated Christmas with some sort of service consisting of scripture readings, skits, or caroling. Everett Alvarez claimed that singing carols was “a moving substitute for the warmth of absent families.” He recalled, “The deep voices of male choristers carried well beyond the walls of our room.” These moments created

129 Ibid.
130 Ibid.
131 Ibid.
132 Alvarez, Chained Eagle, 249.
lasting memories that would be forever tied to the music. Ted Ballard reminisced about a small group singing “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing” and “Silent Night,” saying “I shall never forget that Christmas Eve.” He also cherished when Ed Davis sang a song about Mary before the birth of Jesus, and he added, “I’ll never forget Gobel James and his beautiful rendition of ‘O Holy Night.’” The performances of untrained singers were remembered with clarity and emotional resonance five decades after they were heard, a phenomenon which merits more study.

John McCain described a Christmas service led by Quincy Collins’s choir in great detail, saying “the hymns were rendered with more feeling and were more inspirational than the offerings of the world’s most celebrated choirs.” He wrote,

The lightbulbs hanging from the ceiling illuminated our gaunt, unshaven, dirty, and generally wretched congregation. But for a moment we all had the absolutely exquisite feeling that our burdens had been lifted. It was more sacred to me than any service I had attended in the past, or any service I have attended since…. The last hymn sung was “Silent Night.” Many of us wept.

“Silent Night” was the most impactful carol for numerous POWs, sometimes bringing them comfort and other times causing pain. Al Stafford recalled how the song “filled them with all the sweet and melancholy feelings that song evokes,” but in his case, “the hymn was touched with another note, a profounder sadness and deeper longing than Stafford could ever remember feeling.”

133 Ballard, “The Traditional One-String Instrument.”

134 Ibid.

135 McCain, Faith of our Fathers, 330.

136 Ibid.

137 Norman, Bouncing Back, 203.
in Room Three was “memorable.” He continued, “It’s about Christmas. It’s about the birth of our Lord. And that was a very comforting hymn.”¹³⁸ Jim Sehorn learned the German version of the carol from his cellmate, Konrad Trautman, a German immigrant. Sehorn sang “Stille Nacht” every Christmas season after his release, even five decades later.¹³⁹ Even those POWs who did not have strong emotional reactions to the carol remembered hearing or performing it at some point in prison. Joe Crecca wrote, “As a part of a quartet I sang ‘Silent Night’ at Christmas in 1970 or 1971. We were awful.”¹⁴⁰ Fred Purrington, who sang in his cell’s Christmas choir, shared Crecca’s sentiment, noting “It would be stretching the point to call it Entertainment from other than a comedy view.”¹⁴¹

**Last Christmas**

To the American POWs, it appeared that the United States had finally decided to win the war. Then, on Christmas, no bombs fell. No aircraft disturbed the peaceful celebrations observed in Camp Unity. In each building and room, POWs sang hymns, recited the Pledge of Allegiance, and listened to a homily.

— Alvin Townley, *Defiant*¹⁴²

By 1972, the earliest captures were nearing a decade in prison. The POWs had no access to news besides the propaganda of the Vietnamese, so they did not know if peace talks were in process. They saw nothing to suggest that they would be home soon. Their hope continued to wane as day after day ticked by. Suddenly, the earth shook and the

¹³⁸ Smith, interview.

¹³⁹ Sehorn, e-mail message to author.

¹⁴⁰ Joe Crecca, e-mail message to author, September 19, 2015.

¹⁴¹ Fred Purrington, e-mail message to author, August 29, 2015.

¹⁴² Townley, *Defiant*, 326.
prison walls began to shatter around them. This was the beginning of Linebacker II, also known as the Eleven Day War, when the United States bombarded northern Vietnam with a fleet of B-52s. As soon as bombs started falling in Hanoi, the POWs cheered. Jim Stockdale proclaimed to his cellmate, “It’s a B-52 raid, Harry. Pack your bags. We’re going home.”

The operation that would later be called “The Christmas Bombings” started on the night of December 18, 1972. Cecil Brunson, a young Air Force lieutenant, was counting down the hours to his twenty-fifth birthday when the first bombs hit. The men in his cellblock tapped through the walls to him, “Happy birthday, Cec! Signed, Tricky Dick [President Nixon].” The celebrations did not last long, however, because the bombs were getting closer and the prisoners wondered if the government really knew exactly where the prisons were. Brunson described the events of December 19 at 2:00 AM:

The bombs went off immediately, ninety feet outside our cellblock, destroying our cellblock. The roof fell in on us. When the smoke and the dust all settled, I could see the iron door on our cell was twisted. There was shrapnel imbedded in every wall of our cell. You could see through the foot-and-a-half thick concrete walls, through the cracks, but not one American was injured that night.

Brunson and all the POWs at outlying camps were moved back to the Hanoi Hilton to live in large groups behind thicker walls.

Over the next few days, the bombing intensified every night, leaving the POWs stressed and exhausted. Brunson recalled, “The noise was deafening. The ground would

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143 Ibid.
144 Cecil Brunson, “Veterans Day” (speech, Crossroads Baptist Church, Eads, TN, November 10, 2019).
145 Ibid.
actually heave from the concussion of the bombs.” Every night the bombing was getting more and more ferocious, and the heaving of the ground, the tremendous, tremendous noise – the SAMs going off, the AAA being fired. And on this particular night, December 23rd, it was so ferocious, we thought this might be our last night. As we sat in our cell, we began to sing “The Lord’s Prayer,” and as I sang that praise song to God, God did an amazing thing for me. It’s almost as if He pressed the mute button on all the sound around me, all the commotion, all the confusion was gone. It was just me and God right there.

This supernatural experience was so overwhelming that Brunson told of it during every speech he gave about his POW experience.

Christmas of 1972 was both somber and exciting. The prisoners had watched as multiple B-52s were shot out of the sky, and while at least one man from every downed plane had joined them in prison, many more were unaccounted for and presumed dead. The bombings paused for thirty-six hours for the holiday, upsetting the prisoners. Richard Stratton groaned, “We once again stupidly stood down and gave the VC a chance to rearm.” However, the peaceful respite allowed them to celebrate Christmas together for the last time.

The holiday festivities were different that year. Any preparations they had made over the previous months were worthless, since they lost anything they had made in the rubble and were shuffled around with new roommates. For the first time in years, the prisoners had hope that this would be their last Christmas away from home. Also, for the

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146 Ibid.
147 Ibid.
148 Richard A. Stratton, e-mail message to author, August 26, 2015.
first time in years, the POWs were not focused solely on Christmas. Ted Ballard wrote, “Christmas Eve, 1972, was a quiet one for us. The choir sang some carols and that was about it. Our thoughts and prayers were about the future.”

After recording every minute detail of every Christmas they had spent in prison, most POWs who wrote memoirs skipped over their final Christmas celebrations. The men who were interviewed for this study were able to remember every carol they sang in the earlier years, but their memory of 1972 was blurry. Jim Latham said, “I believe we had a Christmas Eve church service amid the bombing attacks and we probably sang some carols but I really don’t have vivid recollection of that.”

A combination of fear and elation occupied their minds during the bombings, creating much stronger memories than a simple Christmas service could. Only those with exceptional experiences surrounding the Christmas celebration formed solid memories. Emotional reaction to music was still clearly linked to distinct recollection. Jim Sehorn could recall every detail of his Christmas Eve worship service in 1972 because it moved him deeply. He wrote, “Room 2, Hanoi Hilton, (HH) in a cold, dimly lit room with approximately 100 POWs, Navy Lt Ed Davis sang ‘O Holy Night’ in a beautiful tenor voice. It was sung with such feeling that it literally brought tears to my eyes. Ed Davis’ ‘O Holy Night’ touched me.” Sehorn was the only POW to report a significant Christmas memory from that year.

149 Ballard, “The Traditional One-String Instrument.”

150 Jim Latham, e-mail message to author, August 27, 2015.

151 Sehorn, e-mail message to author.
After a brief hiatus, the B-52s returned, carpet bombing Hanoi for the rest of the year. When the bombing stopped again, the POWs got nervous. Robert Certain wrote, “That night, we heard no bombing, nor for the next several nights. We became worried that a futile bombing halt was once again being tried to coax the government back to the Paris Peace table.” The prisoners had no way of knowing that the Eleven Day War had accomplished its mission: to bring the Vietnamese back to the table at the Paris Peace Talks. Henry Kissinger quipped, “There was a deadlock in the middle of December… there was a rapid movement when negotiations resumed… on 8 January.”

**Last Services**

The church service held on February 4, the Sunday following the good news, was truly one of thanksgiving. The NV made no attempt to monitor or control our worship.

– Norman McDaniel, *Yet Another Voice*

Negotiations at the Paris Peace Talks took several weeks, but on January 27, 1973, the countries reached an agreement. The Americans had refused any treaty that abandoned the POWs, instead insisting on “peace with honor.” The agreement would include incremental release of the prisoners, at the same rate that soldiers evacuated the country. The Vietnamese planned a big spectacle around the announcement to the

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prisoners, but some of the prisoners already knew the war was over. The POWs in the Zoo had an “intel network” which included a Thai and a South Vietnamese prisoner. Both of those men spoke the native tongue and relayed the news to the Americans.\(^\text{157}\)

The POWs expected the VN to use their release as a propaganda event, and they refused to provide the enemy with any fodder against them. For years, they had seen how their captors could twist the truth. Based on news reports, the entire country of Vietnam consisted of “women, the elderly, and children,” as these were the victims of every bomb the U.S. dropped. According to the Voice of Vietnam, the war ended because “the failure of the air raids forced the US and its henchmen to sit down at the negotiating table.”\(^\text{158}\)

After their daily dose of stories like these, the POWs knew “the North Vietnamese were gonna make a big show of” the announcement that the war had ended.\(^\text{159}\) When the Camp Authority took the prisoners to the Zoo’s auditorium, the cameras started rolling and the commander made his grand announcement, but the POWs did nothing. Brunson recalled, “We decided that when he made the announcement we would just sit there, just stone-faced. And it made him so mad. Cameras were rolling everywhere and nobody was even smiling, just sitting there, sitting there at attention.”\(^\text{160}\)

The prisoners in the Hanoi Hilton did not have friendly translators, so they did not know why they were being gathered in the courtyard. The men were certainly not dressed

\(^{157}\text{Brunson, interview.}\)


\(^{159}\text{Brunson, interview.}\)

\(^{160}\text{Ibid.}\)
for a special occasion, with many of them shirtless or wearing boxers (see fig. 6.6). They could only guess why the local and international press had cameras trained on them, but they assumed it was another propaganda stunt. When the commandant stood before them and declared that the war was over, these prisoners also did nothing, even though they had not planned it. Some were in shock, while others could not believe the news after so many previous disappointments. Many POWs wore “stone-faced expressions” to deny the press any footage of a celebration.\textsuperscript{161}

![Figure 6.6. U.S. Prisoners of War, The Zoo, Hanoi, Vietnam, March 1973. Source: Horst Faas, AP Photo.](image)

Thomas Moe explained why the POWs reacted this way: “First of all, we were not going to be jubilant in front of their cameras. Plus, after all of the years of dashed expectations, we had gotten numb — that was just how all of us reacted to the news. It

\textsuperscript{161} Townley, \textit{Defiant}, 329.
was amazing how we all thought alike when something like that would happen.”

When the commandant completed his announcement, Robbie Risner turned to face the hundreds of POWs before him. He shouted, “Fourth Allied POW Wing, atten-hut!” The stomping of so many sandals in unison sounded “like a small thunderclap.” The prisoners saluted each other and marched back to their cells in formation.

The prisoners were elated but nervous, filled with “cautious optimism.” The releases would be staggered over the next two months, and anything could happen in that time. The SROs ordered the POWs to act dignified and professional, with “no celebrations, no fraternization or friendliness, and no unnecessary confrontation with the prison guards.” The message that circulated through the camp was “Don’t kiss them goodbye.” Claude Clower expounded, “Don’t let them be good to you at the end of captivity and forget what happened before.” It was easy to forget what came before when the treatment was suddenly so good. Men who were emaciated from losing up to 75 pounds in prison gained as much as ten pounds back in the last month.

With all the excitement surrounding their upcoming release, it would also be easy to forget the faith that was necessary just weeks ago. This was not the case with the prisoners in Vietnam, however. For many, their last act in Vietnam was singing in a


\[163\] Townley, *Defiant*, 329.

\[164\] Ibid.

\[165\] Ibid.


church service. After fighting for the most basic religious freedoms, these men were ready to return to the land where worshipping God was a right. Their last service in prison was emotional and often based on thankfulness.

When the war ended, the Camp Authority finally removed the restrictions they had placed on church services. The POWs were now able to meet for as long as they wanted, sing as much as they wanted, and read the Bible as often as they wanted. They could worship together with their entire cellblock, and they did not have to submit their service in writing ahead of time. Since the men would be released in order of capture, the prisoners were sorted into rooms based on their shootdown date. The officers who had lived in Rawhide or solitary confinement for years were returned to the general population, and some experienced their first communal worship after years of longing for church.

Norm McDaniel had many of the highest-ranking officers in his room for his final service, which “centered around thankfulness for God’s care and guidance over the difficult, at times seemingly impossible past six, seven, or eight or more years.” He remembered that “effective music was furnished under Quincy Collins’s direction.” He wrote extensively about the service on February 11, 1973, calling it “strengthening” and “special, spiritually as well as sentimentally:”

Just think: after hundreds of consecutive Sunday worship services behind prison walls, sometimes shivering with cold, sometimes dripping with sweat, sometimes hungry, and always lonely for our friends at home but never without God’s presence, we could look forward now to our next Sunday worship taking place in

168 McDaniel, Yet Another Voice, 60-61.
169 Ibid.
170 Ibid.
a friendly environment, using songbooks, Bibles, pews, and altars similar to those that had aided us many years ago in praising and worshiping our creator!\(^{171}\)

Eugene McDaniel remembered his last sermon in captivity verbatim:

> Job fell down on his knees and worshiped God and never once lost his integrity. During the period of years which held great suffering, he did not renounce his faith in God, but he endured all that Satan could offer; and God held him in highest esteem, and when God returned to him he made him twice as wealthy…. “Without labor no man can come to rest; without battle no man can come to victory, and the greater the battle the greater the victory.” We have just had our greatest battle, and thus we are just beginning to enjoy our greatest victory.\(^{172}\)

Jay Hess was deeply touched by his final church service at the Plantation on March 11, 1973. “The scene was indelibly imprinted in [his] memory.” As his SRO stood alone, “slightly bent with greying hair and shoulders collecting small droplets of mist,” the choir, a double quartet, sang “You’ll Never Walk Alone.”\(^{173}\) Hess was so moved by the words, “At the end of the storm is a golden sky,” that he insisted on reciting the line to his wife on his first phone call home. He said, “That really struck me. And I was impressed that things might be looking up.”\(^{174}\) He “could feel a lot of the bitterness of the men leave them in this wonderful service.”\(^{175}\)

While the purpose of church services during the war was religious freedom and fighting back, the significance of these services after the war seemed to be transition – forgiving their captors, letting go of the past, rationalizing their lost years, and preparing for the future. These men had been away from their families and their culture for a long

\(^{171}\) Ibid., 63.

\(^{172}\) McDaniel, Before Honor, 176.

\(^{173}\) Jay Hess, e-mail message to author, September 11, 2015.


\(^{175}\) Ibid., 149.
time. They could not predict what awaited them. Some would go home to find their wives had moved on, their parents or their children had died, or they no longer belonged. This fear was different from what they had dealt with for years, but it was fear nonetheless. After seeing how prayer and worship carried them through the hardest times of their lives, it makes sense that they would turn to it once again as they faced new doubts and insecurities.

The later captures had even more reasons to be nervous. With only 110 POWs still in Vietnam, they were all “conscious of those who were absent, those who had gone on home to freedom and life.” They were scheduled for release on March 28, but the SRO came back from his meeting with the camp commander with bad news. Their release was delayed because the VN accused the U.S. of “violating the peace agreements in the South.”176 In truth, the VN had violated the agreement by refusing to release American POWs held in Laos, so the U.S. refused to sweep the mines in the harbor until the prisoners were released. The Vietnamese retaliated by refusing to release the POWs in Hanoi. Robert Certain recalled, “Our fears of a new stalemate grew exceptionally large as we speculated and our hope for an on-time release fell into the cellar.”177 The threats of additional bombing made the Vietnamese release the Laotian prisoners.

The POWs in Hanoi were left in the dark, unsure if their release would ever come. Brunson noted, “We got delayed and delayed, so we weren’t really sure. You just never knew until the wheels lifted off out of Hanoi that we were really going home. So it’s hard


to get excited, or hard to have a bunch of hope until we were in total control.**178** Jack Trimble echoed these anxieties:

On March 28th, we were supposed to be released, but something went wrong, and of course, we always feared that we wouldn’t be released anyways. The sun came up on the 28th, and it went back down, and we sat in our cell, not knowing what was going on, but watching the sun. And we were in despair, thinking the day had passed.**179**

Before the prisoners knew if they would be released, Trimble found strength in music:

As the sun was rising on the 29th, I looked over and saw Alfred Agnew sitting next to the window, with just a small shaft of light coming up behind him, putting him in a silhouette. As he sat there with his head hung low, he started to sing, with this beautiful baritone voice, “America the Beautiful.” It was so magical that we all sat there awe-struck for a few seconds, but then we couldn’t help but join in.**180**

This magical moment was ingrained in his memory with the same lasting power that his release carried.

The last group of POWs waited and worried while every minute dragged by. They needed something to distract them and encourage them. They chose to hold a church service and draw strength from God. Just before the service began, the POWs received the news that they were going home that day. The SRO said, “Let’s finish the service when we get to the Philippines!”**181** This and every other group of released POWs insisted on holding a church service when they reached the Clark Air Force Base. Their first service after release was also focused on thankfulness, and they sang the same songs they

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**178** Brunson, interview.

**179** Jack Trimble, interview by author, Memphis, TN, February 9, 2016.

**180** Ibid.

had sung in prison, even though they had access to hymnals.\footnote{Kenneth R. Isreal, “Report on Operation Homecoming by Chaplain Kenneth R. Isreal,” April 6, 1973, Charles H. Schmidt Collection, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech University, https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=24470116001 (accessed 05 Mar 2020).} Following the same rituals with the same people in a different setting seemed to bring them closure.

**Lessons Learned**

All of the prisoners with whom I lived had either a belief in, interest in, or respect for God, and most of them participated in the worship services. There were some men who turned to our Lord for the first time while in prison, and there were others whose faith was strengthened. The enthusiasm in participation and the uplift gained from our church services varied a little from time to time, depending on the outlook of our prospects of returning home. When the prospects were good, it added an additional touch of vitality to the services. Poor prospects in some instances prompted us to more urgently seek from God the strength to hold on; but in a few cases the poor prospects provoked a feeling of fatigue and uncertainty as to how much longer we’d be subjected to such a trying existence.


Faith is not a cure-all for every person in a trying circumstance. Some men with extraordinary faith were unable to survive the Hanoi prison camps. Some men relied on other activities to keep them going. Some men practiced mental gymnastics, like James Stockdale computing logarithms,\footnote{Plumb, *I’m No Hero*, 47.} and some practiced physical gymnastics, like Barry Bridger, who performed incredible maneuvers in his tiny cell and taught himself to juggle with his hands in manacles.\footnote{Wyatt, *We Came Home*, 77.} Faith is not the only method of survival, but based on the extensive research and reporting of the POWs, it is the most common.

Many POWs credit their great leadership with their remarkable performance in Vietnam. Risner, Denton, Stockdale, Rutledge, and other high-ranking officers...
encouraged their men to communicate, resist, and keep the faith. Norm McDaniel noted that “all of these men were acutely aware of the great strength and constructive results of sincere belief in and worship of God.” The Code of Conduct, established in 1955, ends with the line, “I will trust in my God and in the United States of America.” The armed forces require each soldier to complete SERE Training (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape), and lessons from the Vietnam POWs have been incorporated. Based on the experiences and writings of Admiral Stockdale, SERE now teaches soldiers:

Keep the faith in your God, your country, your family, your fellow captives, yourself. Whatever helps you to get through your captivity. You may be a prisoner for years. Know that your country is trying to get you back. Know that the people back home haven’t forgotten about you. Don’t fall into despondency; keep yourself occupied by trying to find a way out.

Officers are trained to “promote the individual subordinate’s faith in God and country,” and the military suggests this “is best accomplished by continually displaying a personal example in living up to the code.”

The U.S. military accepts faith as a vital part of survival, but music is absent from the training manuals. If the authors of those manuals would read the memoirs of the Vietnam POWs, they would find that almost every time faith is mentioned, it is in tandem with music. Whether the prisoner was humming a hymn in isolation or singing exuberantly at a church service, faith was undeniably expressed through music. The

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186 McDaniel, Yet Another Voice, 61.


POWs in Camp Unity could have held church services without music and the Camp Authority probably would have left them alone, but this was not acceptable to the Americans. Worshipping God in song and melding their voices together in harmony was worth the risk of death. If music carried this much weight in their daily lives, then the military is likely overlooking a crucial aspect of the POWs’ perseverance.

When the POWs discussed the effect religion had on their lives in prison, they almost always talked about the church services and communal worship. One POW said, “When I joined the group which had church services, I faithfully attended every Sunday. I felt that they were of tremendous value. There is no doubt in my mind that religion is obviously helpful to someone in that situation. It was for me and for many others.” The musical portion of the services had the greatest impact on their mental health and their feeling of unity. Gobel James wrote, “Singing in Quincy Collins’s church and entertainment choirs provided a great outlet for frustrations and was a great emotional support. It gave us something to look forward to and helped to pass the time.”

The prisoners were limited in their emotional outlets during a very emotional period. They could not shout or run or escape from their stressors, but they still had music. Performing and listening to music are numbers one and two on a list of fifty ways to “constructively channel negative emotions,” because psychological studies have

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191 James, e-mail message to author.
shown that music lowers stress and improves health.\textsuperscript{193} The POWs did not know why music made them feel better, but they were convinced it made a difference. Kay Russell told reporters at Clark Air Force Base that he “had derived such great pleasure and support” from “singing while in the hands of the Communists.”\textsuperscript{194} Russell’s choir performed four hymns for the press upon their release, wiping tears from their eyes as they sang. The emotional support and connection they had experienced while singing in the prison did not dissipate when they left Vietnam.

Music has also provided healing since the war and united former enemies as friends. Jack Trimble was nervous when he agreed to meet Tran Viet, the Vietnamese fighter pilot who had shot him down forty years earlier. As they walked through a park, however, Trimble noticed that “Tran was humming a tune barely perceptible.”\textsuperscript{195} He wrote, “I was at first baffled. Then as I listened I had to smile. He was humming the \textit{Red River Valley Ballad}.” Trimble and the other American pilots who flew over North Vietnam were part of the Red River Valley Fighter Pilots Association, and were affectionately called River Rats, because they fought along the Red River. The River Rats adopted “Red River Valley” as their theme song. For Trimble to hear his theme song from the lips of his rival was shocking. He continued,

\begin{quote}
He stopped when he noticed I’d heard it. I told him “me too” and put my hand on his shoulder and started to hum along. Then I told him, “Thanks, Tran, you’ve given me a beautiful story to tell.” We walked on around the park and though I didn’t get a chance to talk to him much more with a translator we realized we
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{194} Associated Press, “Nobody Cared If Lyrics Not Accurate,” \textit{Alabama Journal} (Montgomery), March 7, 1973.

were both Red River Valley Fighter Pilots and that our U.S. traditions had become theirs, too.\textsuperscript{196}

An old cowboy song had united these men in friendship.

In the Hanoi Hilton and other camps, music gave the POWs both comfort and strength. It gave them the will to fight and the will to forgive. It was the foundation of the prisoners’ unity and their communion with God. Music maintained the sanity of men who were isolated more than five years, and it brought men back from the brink of despair. Although music is powerful, it produced the best results when combined with faith.

\textsuperscript{196} Ibid.
PART II

HOPE
Chapter Seven

Hope to Survive

The prophet Zechariah once described the people of Israel as “prisoners of hope.” How well that describes my state of mind during the months in Camp Unity. All my actions, all my movements were energized by hope. The hope of release constrained me when I would have flung myself against the walls in a futile effort to break free. Hope dominated my thoughts, controlling me in that concrete environment, until the day the trap would be sprung open. Truly, I was a prisoner of hope.

– Sam Johnson, Captive Warriors

Hope – that inexplicable feeling that things will get better – drove the POWs to continue fighting for life and freedom. Believing that they would make it home someday helped to make their beliefs a reality. Thich Nhat Hanh wrote, “Hope is important because it can make the present moment less difficult to bear. If we believe that tomorrow will be better, we can bear a hardship today.” The POWs who survived the war shared a common conviction that their nation and their loved ones would never leave them behind. John Clark avered, “Regardless of what ‘they’ said, or how hopeless the situation might have seemed at times, I knew I was never forgotten or abandoned.”

David Hatcher added, “In the midst of all the torture and depraved living conditions, the

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1 Sam Johnson and Jan Winebrenner, Captive Warriors: A Vietnam POW’s Story (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1992), 252.


loneliness and the solitude, there was always a spark of hope and optimism.”

Robinson Risner echoed, “I never lost hope, and never did I despair of coming back alive.”

While faith played a major role in the survival of the prisoners of war, some men who exhibited strong faith did not survive their time in Vietnam. Physically strong men who had resisted the enemy for years suddenly “gave up and died” for no apparent reason. George Coker explained,

Caught in the grip of loneliness and uncertainty, the P.W. could easily fall into the clutches of self-pity, becoming convinced that he had been unfairly singled out for punishment by a blind fate. In such a state, one begins to lose confidence in the things he thought he devoutly believed in – God, country, family, honor. He begins to doubt himself…. After extended periods in this state, the mind starts doing very funny things to the body, such as refusing to eat, or to wash. Other prisoners try to talk to you, but they are telling you things that your mind no longer wishes to hear. You start to refuse to communicate. The deeper you get into it, the more you wallow in your own muck, as it were, and the more you like it there. Others are trying to get you out, but you cut yourself off. You are isolated and slowly you go crazy. Regardless of the physical event that actually killed a man, the thing that led up to it was the lack of communications, the resulting isolation, and the total aloneness which put a man into this state. Eventually he was unable to get out of it and his mind began to act irrationally. At length he died either

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4 Ibid., 230.

5 Ibid., 448.

from mental problems, or from some physical problem that was actually psychologically based, such as refusing to eat. They had issues like this that were psychological issues.8

Jerry Coffee noted, “When isolated we tend to magnify our own shortcomings, but when interacting with others we can more easily see that everyone is human, has weaknesses and regrets.” He realized that when prisoners were cut off from the others, “guilt and shame would be some men’s undoing.” Those POWs were overcome with hopelessness and despair.

Holding onto hope was no simple task, and the prisoners often needed encouragement from each other. However, Ho Chi Minh knew, “Communication is the lifeblood of resistance.” Leo Thorsness said the Vietnamese put the POWs in isolation because “they believed in the divide-and-conquer theory.” He wrote, “They believed that if they could isolate us, they could prevent us from communicating. Both they and we knew that if the prisoners could communicate, we could organize. If we could organize, we could resist – or at least resist better.”

Complete isolation was the VN’s main weapon against both resistance and hope, and communication is how the POWs countered that weapon. Eugene McDaniel wrote, “Communicate or die, then, was the positive cry for me. But this decision had its painful

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9 Ibid.
complications too. I could not lose my will to communicate, to resist, to stay alive.”

Communicating was dangerous but necessary to keep up the spirits of those who spent years alone. Howie Rutledge claimed to find hope when, thirty seconds after his arrival in a new solitary cell, he was “on the line” with nearby prisoners. McDaniel said this kind of contact was essential to morale:

Men faced with the hopelessness of a military prison and the uncertainty of what a day might bring from the enemy, surrounded by walls too high to look over, and confined to a small room with nothing to do but think and sink deeper into depression, soon became desperate to communicate with others.

When the POWs returned to America, they touted the success of their tap code to anyone who would listen. Lee Ellis exclaimed, “It would be difficult to overemphasize how much that code lifted our spirits. I felt like a starving man who had just been given filet mignon with all the trimmings. Never again would I take communications for granted.” Byron Fuller wrote, “Without communications, no one would have survived. It was the bedrock of everything we did, and the glue that kept us together as a unit.” Mike McGrath added, “Communications were the lifelines of our covert camp organization. It was essential for everyone to know what was happening in camp,

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16 Ibid., 108.
whether the news was about a new torture or just a friendly word of encouragement to a
disheartened fellow POW.”¹⁷

The POWs’ dedication to communicate was based on James Stockdale’s policy of
“Unity over Self.”¹⁸ Ronald Lebert said this mantra “helped diminish the feeling that it
was you or one or two of your roommates against all North Vietnam.”¹⁹ Everett Alvarez
explained,

This commitment to unity saw many a lame and hobbled individual through the
darkest days and the most perilous moments. It fueled our morale and stiffened
our backbone. Above all, it kept us informed of what had happened to others and
what we could expect. To be forewarned was to be forearmed. We all knew how
doubly important it was to try and keep in touch with those manacled and roped in
solitary confinement. It was vital to keep up their spirits.²⁰

Coffee described the prison community as “interdependent,” “reaching down to help, and
then up to be helped.”²¹

Communication may seem like an easy answer to a potentially fatal problem, but
the prisoners risked their lives every time they attempted to converse with one another.

The Vietnamese posted the following rule in each cell:

The criminal must maintain silence in the detention rooms and not make any loud
noises which can be heard outside. All schemes and attempts to gain information
and achieve communication with the criminals living next door by intentionally
talking loudly, tapping on walls or by other means will be strictly punished.²²

¹⁷ John M. McGrath, Prisoner of War: Six Years in Hanoi (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1975), 34.

¹⁸ Coffee, Beyond Survival, 304.

¹⁹ Wyatt, We Came Home, 318.

²⁰ Everett Alvarez and Anthony Pitch, Chained Eagle: The True Heroic Story of Eight-and-One-

²¹ Coffee, Beyond Survival, 145.

²² McGrath, Prisoner of War, 112.
Charles Boyd noted, “They were determined to keep all of us isolated and incommunicado. Nothing was more important to them than enforcing this rule.”\(^{23}\)

If communication was discovered, the punishment was swift and severe. In addition to the rope trick, prisoners would also be hung upside down from the ceiling, beaten brutally, or “forced to crawl through latrines filled with human excrement.”\(^{24}\) Each method of communication was inevitably exposed through torture, including the tap code.

The certainty of future pain never stopped the POWs from reaching out to their neighbors. Bobby Wagnon remarked, “The need to communicate with their fellows was intense enough…to drive POW’s to risk anything in order to continue.”\(^{25}\) Despite the tremendous risk, Boyd said, “The POWs would respond to a question without a moment’s hesitation. We all gained tremendous satisfaction by getting away with it. I don’t believe the average man in the street would risk a broken fingernail to tell you the cost of a cubic yard of concrete, but every POW I ever knew would go to any extreme to help another prisoner.”\(^{26}\)

Talking between cells carried the greatest risk, so the POWs devised many other methods of communication. They would leave notes all over camp. They would use sign


\(^{25}\) Ibid.

language. They would leave messages in food bowls and on walls. Of course, their most successful method was the tap code, but tapping on a wall strategically produced limited volume. To transfer messages quickly across an entire cellblock or camp, the prisoners had to get more creative. They discovered that the tap code could be transmitted in infinite ways; e.g., sweeping, snapping wet clothes, shuffling feet, coughing, flashing light or shadows, or “using an earth tamper in ‘code.’”

They also learned that music was an effective mode of transmitting a message.

Music as Communication

For several days, they talked and sang to one another through the open windows until an officer reprimanded them. The two protested: They had to talk. There was nothing else to do. “You are absolutely forbidden to speak or make any sounds,” he ordered. “You must only sit and ponder your crimes against the Vietnamese people!”

-Alvin Townley, Defiant

Jim Stockdale wrote an article about communications in the prison camps, explaining the importance of the tap code. He argued that the “Morse Code is no good” because “you cannot cope with the limitations of a bitonal system.” He claimed they needed “monotonal systems” with “a reliable, repetitive beat.” Stockdale was a talented musician and philosopher, but he lacked proper nomenclature for the system he described. The tone of a sound in Morse Code was not the issue. The problem came when

27 Donald Spoon, e-mail message to author, September 6, 2015.
30 Ibid.
someone tried to represent a “dash” with a tap that has no duration. The prisoners needed a code that depended on repetition instead of duration, and the tap code fit that bill.

Once the prisoners learned the code, they “were able to communicate probably at the rate of 5, 6, 8 words per minute.”\(^3\) When the guards were not around, the taps resounded throughout the cellblocks. Ron Bliss noted that the building sounded “like a den of runaway woodpeckers.”\(^3\) Stockdale remembered his cell in Little Vegas “sounded something like the Merrill, Lynch, Pierce, Fenner and Smith Office in Palo Alto with all the teletypes going.”\(^3\)

To call up a neighbor for a conversation, the POWs tapped a uniquely American rhythm. Stockdale wrote, “When an American hears ‘shave and a haircut,’ even if he has never thought of a code, he almost automatically lunges to the wall and supplies his ‘two bits.’”\(^3\) The Vietnamese guards had extracted the code and they would try to trick the Americans into giving them information through the walls. By opening each communication with “shave and a haircut,” the prisoner could determine whether the listener was “a legitimate sender or a VC trying to pull a fast one,” because, “the VC, for some reason, could not figure out that rhythm.”\(^3\)

Before starting a communication session of any kind, the prisoners needed to clear the area for guards. Each cellblock had its own signal for “okay” and “danger,” but

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\(^3\) Bob Shumaker, e-mail message to author, August 27, 2015.


\(^3\) Ibid.

\(^3\) McDaniel, *Before Honor*, 78.
most of them used whistling to send these alerts. For example, in one area of Heartbreak Hotel, “Mary Had a Little Lamb” was the “all clear,” and when a guard approached, someone whistled “Pop! Goes the Weasel.” In other cellblocks, “Anchors Aweigh” and “It’s a Grand Old Flag” indicated it was safe to communicate, and “Stormy Weather” signified trouble.

Some prisoners used music to transmit messages in code. Jeremiah Denton whistled the names and shootdown dates of new prisoners to Ed Davis in an adjacent building at the Zoo. Quincy Collins sent communiqués on a flute that the guards mysteriously gave him in 1969. He said they took it back a week later when they realized he “was using it for ulterior purposes.” Another prisoner convinced the camp that he needed a violin so he could learn to play. While his neighbors said “his musical efforts were enough to make your hair stand on end,” he was more concerned with the code he was playing than the notes. Art Black volunteered to play the drums over the camp radio for Christmas one year. After sarcastically announcing it was a family tradition, he

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banged a drum “like a kindergartener.” He was able to provide comedic entertainment for his fellow Americans while sending code the entire time.43

The drawback of using code in such a variety of sounds was that “insignificant actions and gestures could be seen as possibly meaningful.”44 A prisoner recounted, “One day, one of those prisoners, looking straight at me, while his guard was a few steps away, whistled ‘Plaisirs d’Amour.’ Was he trying to convey anything?”45 Bobby Wagnon concluded that “when contact was so limited, the thought of a wasted ‘conversation’ could be maddening.”46

The majority of musical communication in the Vietnamese prison camps did not use code, other than the emotional encoding that certain songs maintain through sentimental or nationalistic connections. Many POWs discussed how a few notes of a familiar song could change their outlook entirely. Jerry Coffee recalled his first night in solitary, when Robbie Risner “whistled ‘Yankee Doodle’ from his cell which I could hear through the windows and the wall, which gave me almost a euphoric sense of relief that I truly wasn’t alone.”47 Jerry Denton was also greeted by “a soulful ‘Yankee Doodle’ whistled in welcome, courtesy of POW John McKamey.”48

42 Alvarez, Chained Eagle, 173.

43 George R. Hall and Pat Hall, Commitment to Honor: A Prisoner of War Remembers Vietnam, (Jackson, MS: Franklin Printers, 2005), 71.


45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.


48 Townley, Defiant, 34.
The patriotic serenade served two purposes, alerting the current prisoners of a new arrival and announcing the presence of Americans to the new capture. “Yankee Doodle” and other tunes were “often the first signal the newcomers received.” Bill Tschudy noted, “As the jeep pulled into the Heartbreak courtyard, I heard someone whistling ‘God Bless America,’ and ‘It’s a Grand Old Flag,’ and so I knew there were Americans around.” Tschudy remembered whistling a lot during his time in Vietnam. He said, “I’ve been in places that at times sounded like a bird cage.”

In addition to the initial greeting, POWs used whistling to identify themselves to other prisoners. Cecil Brunson explained, “We used whistling in solitary to tell each other about ourselves. I was from Tennessee, ‘Tennessee Waltz,’ ‘Air Force Hymn.’ Guy down the way, he was from Texas, so he whistled the ‘Yellow Rose of Texas’ and he whistled the ‘Navy Hymn.’” Ralph Galati likewise recalled hearing the Air Force song from a nearby prisoner in solitary. He wrote,

The immediate reaction is, well, you know it’s gotta be an American, because no Vietnamese is gonna sing or whistle that song. So music being the common denominator, with certain songs being automatic…. When you hear those things you kinda know it’s an American. Other stuff you can be suspect about, but there’s a few things like that that’s universally American, that kinda gives you immediate connection that someone here is trying to make contact with you or help you. It was absolutely rejuvenating when you knew you weren’t totally alone. You might be in solitary, but you knew you had somebody out there that was trying to contact you or protect you or give you some guidance.

49 Rochester, Honor Bound, 111.

50 Stephen Rowan, They Wouldn’t Let Us Die: The Prisoners of War Tell Their Story (Middle Village, NY: Jonathan David Publishers, 1973), 188.


52 Cecil Brunson, interview by author, Pensacola, FL, September 5, 2014.

53 Ralph Galati, telephone interview with author, September 1, 2015.
In the early years, each prisoner had his own personal identifying song that he would whistle or sing as he moved around so the other men could keep track of him.\textsuperscript{54} In Alcatraz, all eleven prisoners had a “self-assigned emergency tune,” usually related to his home state.\textsuperscript{55} For each man’s birthday, the other prisoners would snap their laundry in code to say “happy birthday” and then whistle his song in a “very sentimental” celebration.\textsuperscript{56}

Many POWs attempted to connect with other Americans through music. Everett Alvarez had been alone for months, but when he discovered that other pilots had been shot down, he tried to reach them. He wrote, “Vainly, I tried to make contact. Sometimes I’d go to the peep-hole, at other times stand in the back yard, and whistle ‘California Here I Come’ and ‘Mexican Hat Dance.’”\textsuperscript{57} Rodney Knutson called out many times to see if other Americans were around, but no one answered. When he realized the prisoners might think this was a trick of the enemy, he decided to do something “genuinely American” to ease their minds. He whistled the Marine Hymn and got an immediate response.\textsuperscript{58}

Charlie Plumb and Kay Russell were concerned about a fellow POW in grave condition who had not made contact. When they had tried every other method to get his

\textsuperscript{54} “POW Secret Code,” \textit{Stars and Stripes}.

\textsuperscript{55} Townley, \textit{Defiant}, 248.

\textsuperscript{56} James B. Stockdale Jr., telephone interview with author, September 3, 2015.

\textsuperscript{57} Alvarez, \textit{Chained Eagle}, 112.

attention, Plumb whistled “Anchors Aweigh” to the unknown man. He received “a feeble response. Tooooot Toot Toot Toot Toot-toot.” Among the bloody rags outside the injured prisoner’s door was a pile of white hair. Plumb commented, “There’s only one guy in the world with phosphorescent hair.” The men knew the downed Navy pilot was John McCain.59

Not every POW got positive results from whistling. Every morning, Jerry Coffee “stretched up as close to the window as possible, whistled ‘Yankee Doodle,’ and listened. Nothing.”60 But many prisoners located old friends by performing simple melodies. Larry Guarino was surprised to hear “Up in the Air, Junior Birdmen” from his bunk one night. He called out to the mysterious warbler and found out his neighbor was Bob Peel. Upon identifying himself he heard, “Larry! What a place to meet you again!”61 Peel’s whistling had also comforted Jim Stockdale, who was alone and in misery with a leg “which bent askew and looked almost detached at the knee.” Peel was across the hall doing laundry and whistling “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad.” Stockdale whistled “Anchors Aweigh” to him and was “relieved to hear the Air Force Song whistled in return.”62 Such elation and relief from a simple stanza is incomprehensible for the general masses, but a few notes of a familiar tune were as powerful as physical contact for these men in lonely desperation.


60 Coffee, Beyond Survival, 101.


The effectiveness of certain songs must have been obvious to the Americans’ allies in the prison camp, because they began to use the same method to communicate. An indigenous prisoner known affectionately as “Crazy Guy” connected with Alvarez by shouting “Yoo hoo!” and then vigorously whistling the Marine Corps Hymn and “Cherry Blossom Pink and Apple Blossom White.” After cackling maniacally, Crazy Guy pantomimed a message to the American prisoner, informing him that another American was in the prison camp, and he needed help. Alvarez found the struggling prisoner on the anniversary of his capture, when he celebrated his survival by “lustily” singing “Oh What a Beautiful Morning!” He heard an American shout, “Oh, my God!” The contact with another American comforted Larry Guarino and lifted him from hopelessness.

Bob Flynn, the lone American prisoner in China, had played trumpet in the University of Minnesota marching band, so he was thrilled when a group of Chinese musicians moved into the nearby cells. They whistled songs for each other, and the tenor would sing “Santa Lucia” for Flynn. Their musical connection became a friendship and they learned to communicate over the next few months. Unfortunately, the guards caught them in the act, so the Chinese prisoners were moved and Flynn sang solo once again.

Back in Hanoi, three Thai prisoners lived among the Americans. They could not speak English, but they wanted to prove they were loyal friends to the U.S. Every Sunday, one of the Thais would whistle the Marine Corps Hymn. The guards assumed it was a Thai military song, so they allowed him to continue. Danny Glenn suggested,
“They weren’t as hard on him because he wasn’t American, and they didn’t think he could communicate with us.” 66 This weekly serenade turned into a strong friendship and alliance. 67 The Americans taught the Thai prisoners English and the tap code, making them part of the communication system. Whether with Vietnamese, Chinese, or Thais, music allowed the Americans to communicate with people they would not have trusted. Ralph Galati observed, “Music was the universal language, whether it was the words or the tune, it usually had a positive impact.” 68

While most of the music discussed so far has been whistling, a few brave POWs sang loud enough to greet, encourage, and instruct their neighbors in the solitary cells. Robbie Risner created a short song to determine if other Americans were nearby (see ex. 7.1). To the tune of “MacNamara’s Band,” he sang his greeting. 69 His song gave the other prisoners the courage to introduce themselves.

67 Rutledge, In the Presence, 84.
68 Galati, interview.
69 Robinson Risner, The Passing of the Night: My Seven Years as a Prisoner of the North Vietnamese (Duncanville, TX: World Wide Printing, 1999), 16.
Example 7.1. Robinson Risner, “Robbie Risner”

Risner would often sing messages to prisoners to make them more comfortable with communicating, and to make it less obvious to the guards that they were. (Several Americans avoided the ropes by convincing the younger, more naïve guards that they were singing, not talking.) Larry Chesley recalled his first afternoon in the Hanoi Hilton, when a familiar song filled his cell, but the words were all different. To the tune of “Besame Mucho,” Risner sang, “My name is Lt. Col. Robinson Risner, American fighter pilot. If you hear me, cough.” Chesley feared this was “some trick of the North Vietnamese,” so he stayed silent. After a few repetitions, Risner began to sing instructions; e.g. “Don’t wear your socks. You’ll need them in the wintertime.” Chesley was still reticent, but when Risner sang, “If you’re Air Force, cough,” Chesley gave in. Within minutes, the two prisoners were whispering through the windows.  

Singing was especially dangerous in the Hanoi Hilton, but it was a typical pastime in the jungles while prisoners made the long trek to the North. Ike Camacho sang

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70 Larry Chesley, Seven Years in Hanoi: A POW Tells His Story (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, Inc., 1973), 17.
regularly in his bamboo cage, so the guards never noticed when he substituted words of encouragement and instructions for the other Americans, a group of Army Special Forces.\textsuperscript{71} As more of their fellow prisoners died from starvation, malaria, and executions, Nick Rowe planned an escape that he coordinated by whistling showtunes, including “Old Man River” and \textit{West Side Story}’s “Tonight.”\textsuperscript{72} Rowe was one of the only Americans to escape from the Viet Cong.\textsuperscript{73}

In the North, punishment camps like Skid Row prohibited talking, but Don Radner took the risk to pass information to his neighbor. On the way to the washstand, Radner sang, “I’m from Baltimore and my wife and kids are….” He claimed his singing had multiple purposes. “First, it was nice to hear each other. Second, if any one of us got out we could say who else was in there. Also it was encouraging. Hearing the others picked me up. More than that, we were getting something over on the enemy.”\textsuperscript{74}

One POW, Doug Hegdahl, fooled his captors into believing that he was a simpleton. A seaman on the USS Canberra, Hegdahl snuck on deck at night to watch the cannons, but the booming weapons knocked him off the ship.\textsuperscript{75} He was captured a mile out in the ocean and taken to Hanoi. He convinced the Camp Authority that he could not read or write so they could not force him to sign a confession. His act was so believable


\textsuperscript{72} Rochester, \textit{Honor Bound}, 235.


\textsuperscript{74} Tom Philpott, \textit{Glory Denied: The Saga of Jim Thompson, America’s Longest-Held Prisoner of War} (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 167.

that the guards allowed him to roam around the camp, allowing him to communicate with numerous prisoners and sabotage the enemy’s equipment (see fig. 7.1)


When Vietnam decided to release three prisoners in 1969 for propaganda, they looked for men who had not been tortured, who were more likely to report positively of their experience. The Code of Conduct does not allow prisoners to accept these releases,
and the officers in the camps made it clear that no POW should volunteer. However, the Camp Authority was very interested in releasing Hegdahl, and the SROs saw this as a great opportunity. They ordered him to accept the release and tell the world how they were really being treated.\textsuperscript{76}

Hegdahl had a unique talent that made him the perfect choice. He said, “I’d always memorized lists of presidents and state capitals, which is kinda trivia, too. So, why not take that ability and harness it for something practical like memorizing names or camp locations?”\textsuperscript{77} Before leaving Vietnam, Hegdahl memorized the names of 250 POWs, along with their shootdown dates and some personal reference, all to the tune of “Old McDonald Had a Farm.”\textsuperscript{78} He explained, “I found that turning the names into a ditty helped.”\textsuperscript{79} Another POW said, “Up until that time, we had no accounting for many of those men, whether they were alive or dead.”\textsuperscript{80} After his release, Hegdahl visited many families to report the good news.\textsuperscript{81} His song, which he could still sing decades later, gave peace of mind to families who had heard nothing from their loved ones in up to five

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{77} Taylor Baldwin Kiland, \textit{Open Doors: Vietnam POWs Thirty Years Later} (Coronado, CA: Museum of History and Art, 2002), 35.


\textsuperscript{79} Kiland, \textit{Open Doors}.


\textsuperscript{81} Townley, \textit{Defiant}, 260.
years. He is still considered the only authorized early release by the NAM-POW organization.\textsuperscript{82}

Music brought hope to the prisoners of war in solitary confinement by connecting them and allowing them to communicate. Knowing they were not alone was often enough to pull them from a deep depression, but creating, practicing, and remembering music was a good diversion to fill the long, empty days. The next chapter will delve into the individual musical expression and creation of the prisoners of war in Vietnam.

\textsuperscript{82} Jeffrey Moore, interview with author, Pensacola, FL, September 11, 2014.
Chapter Eight

Music as a Pastime

He dreamed of the many hobbies he enjoyed – music, dancing, model cars, ceramics, lapidary, and reading while living the reality of starvation, death and dehumanization.

– Gustav A. Mehrer, We Came Home

The POWs in Vietnam spent years alone with their thoughts, experiencing boredom to an extent that most people could never imagine. In such a difficult environment, unbridled thoughts quickly turned to negative emotions. To maintain their hope and sanity, the prisoners had to keep their minds occupied with anything that stopped them from dwelling on their troubles. One man built his dream house in his head, nailing down every detail over several years. Another man practiced golf mentally every day, and though he had not touched a club in eight years, he had “shaved over twenty strokes off of his game” when he played his first round after repatriation. Dreaming of things they wanted to do or have when they got home was a common pastime, but when it came to music, the prisoners were generally looking nostalgically at the past.

Ted Guy knew the danger of letting the mind wander. He claimed, “Boredom and inactivity could prove as deadly as a bullet.” Growing up in the swing era, Guy was the son of a big band leader. His father had taught him entire catalogs of songs, which proved

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to be a blessing during his years in solitary confinement. He spent countless hours mentally recalling the lyrics and tunes, eventually remembering over 700 songs.⁵ He said, “I kept up the exercise my entire imprisonment. It took me two years to get ‘C’est si bon’ down perfectly.”⁶ He added, “Getting through solitary confinement is all about brain games.”⁷

Porter Halyburton was also a born music lover, and he sang to himself for hours every day, “cupping his hands to muffle the sound.”⁸ He made it his mission to remember the lyrics of every song he knew. He asked other prisoners to help him recall lines he had forgotten, and to teach him any songs they knew. His musical library grew so large that he created a mental jukebox, giving a letter and number to each song. Then he filled his days by selecting and singing those songs. For instance, “B12” corresponded with Patsy Cline’s “Born to Lose.”⁹ His jukebox carried everything from show tunes to gospel, alternating “Makin’ Whoopee” with “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.”¹⁰

John Deering combined the architectural pursuits of some prisoners with the musical interests of others to create his own mental project, “construction, equipping, staffing, and managing of a radio station.” To keep his station “running,” he was constantly choosing the next song to play. He admitted the project “soon became an

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⁵ Wyatt, We Came Home, 229.
⁶ Grant, Survivors.
⁷ “Now We Teach You How to Bow,” Maxim, July/August 1999, 79.
⁹ Ibid., 195.
¹⁰ Ibid., 72.
obsession,” but he also claimed this mental exercise was how he “personally survived this rather unfortunate situation.”

The music that comforted a prisoner was often something that he connected to a family member or loved one. Jay Hess had watched The Sound of Music several times in the year before his capture, marveling that his children were the same ages as the children in the show. It is not surprising that he was moved by “My Favorite Things,” a song intended to reassure the children in the musical. He sang, “When the dog bites, when the bee stings, when you’re feeling sad….” He found that the song cheered and encouraged him.

As Robbie Risner mourned that he would spend Thanksgiving Day with his “feet in stocks and on bread and water,” he thought of his family back home celebrating the holiday with music. He wrote, “We would get together a quartet and sing some of the old-time songs like ‘Here comes the man with a sack on his back; Got more crawdads than he can pack,’ or maybe ‘Salty Dog.’” He longed to hear his father’s bass voice and his mother’s skill at the piano. His sentimental memories of the past were strongly associated with music.

Ralph Galati claimed that music was a pastime for musicians and non-musicians alike:

Even if you’re not a singer, it didn’t matter. You were just doing it because you had to do something. There was nothing else to do. Prayer and/or song tended to be therapeutic, to the extent that your memory was intact. You went back to the

11 Wyatt, We Came Home, 150.
12 J.M. Heslop and Dell R. Van Orden, From the Shadow of Death: Stories of POWs (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1973), 140.
13 Robinson Risner, The Passing of the Night: My Seven Years as a Prisoner of the North Vietnamese (Duncanville, TX: World Wide Printing, 1999), 79.
things that gave you some kind of comfort and joy when you were home, and usually it was music and/or prayer for most people.\textsuperscript{14} Galati remembered Don McLean’s “American Pie” was played on his base every day before his shootdown. He tried to sing the song in prison, but he admitted, “When you hear a song on the radio, you have no problem recalling the lyrics, but when you’re by yourself and you’re trying to do it from recall with no music, it’s amazing how you kinda struggle sometimes with the words.”\textsuperscript{15} At almost ten minutes long, the song he chose was not the easiest to memorize. Thankfully, he could remember the repetitive lyrics of the Beach Boys and the Beatles, his favorites in high school and college.

Ben Purcell whistled a few songs every Sunday evening before bed, and he chose nostalgic songs to start off his set. He wrote, “I’d always begin with a familiar Stephen Foster song, such as ‘My Old Kentucky Home,’ followed by a favorite hymn such as ‘Whispering Hope.’ I would then whistle the songs of the four military services and end it all with the ‘Star Spangled Banner.’”\textsuperscript{16} Bill Spencer sang more modern pop songs, but the lyrics betrayed his yearning for home (“Green, Green Grass of Home” and “Georgia on my Mind”) and his longing for loved ones to help carry his burden (“Bridge over Troubled Water”). Spencer’s cellmate, Dick Francis, found Spencer’s singing “beautiful” and “soothing.”\textsuperscript{17}

Associating a song with a specific prisoner proved to be emotionally dangerous for some POWs. Sam Johnson related a sweet moment in the shower, when he heard

\textsuperscript{14} Ralph Galati, telephone interview with author, September 1, 2015.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{16} Ben Purcell and Anne Purcell, \textit{Love and Duty} (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 171.

\textsuperscript{17} Dick Francis, e-mail message to author, August 31, 2015.
George McKnight singing “There are no fighter pilots down in hell.” Johnson wrote, “He was serenading me, and his off-key voice sounded beautiful.” After an unbearably long time alone, Johnson was able to bond with another American through music. They sang the chorus together, but a guard dragged McKnight off for punishment. Johnson had gotten a brief taste of human connection, and losing it was painful. He wrote, “For days, that old tune hung around my thoughts and brought hot, stinging tears to my eyes.”

Jeremiah Denton had a similarly painful experience with Ed Davis, “the typical All-American youngster.” Davis had a beautiful voice and he sang “Fly Me to the Moon” in a “low, resonant tone” that mesmerized Denton. He wrote, “The tender melody floating so gently through my dank cell seemed out of place, but it was awesome.”

Some time later, he heard the young Davis being beaten nearby. Afterwards, Davis tapped to him about the torture he suffered and “tapped a final word: ‘agony.’ Then Jerry listened to him writhe and scream on his floor.” Denton’s mind replayed Davis’s song over the wails, linking the two sounds forever. At his release, he “remembered as though it were only yesterday the soft, deep voice singing ‘Fly Me to the Moon,’ and the single word ‘Agony!’ being tapped out on the wall.”

In South Vietnam, familiar music helped two American prisoners build trust and friendship. Walter Eckes had heard a Cambodian man in his camp liked to cause trouble,
so when a black man stood in his doorway smiling, Eckes assumed the man was a threat. He avoided the man until he heard the authentic American R&B sound of the Temptations’ “Tracks of my Tears.” Eckes knew that no Cambodian could emulate that sound, so he introduced himself. He and Jim Dodson quickly became “brothers,” and they sang “We Gotta Get Out of this Place” together.22

Several POWs who were shot down over South Vietnam, Cambodia, or Laos said that music kept them going on the long march through the jungle. Bill Reeder walked the Ho Chi Minh Trail for more than three months with a broken back and gangrenous leg. He watched as his fellow prisoners died along the way. He was only able to push on by marching to the Beatles’ “Yellow Submarine” and singing Burl Ives’s “A Little Bitty Tear Got Me Down.”23 Frank Anton, on the other hand, found the journey more difficult with his fellow prisoner’s constant, repetitive singing of “Give Me a Ticket for an Airplane.”24 He had no energy for singing until a truck picked them up for the rest of the trip. Suddenly, he burst out with “Where Have All the Flowers Gone?”25

Most of the POWs who sang or whistled while alone did so spontaneously. Tom Barrett sang defiantly after reading the camp rules. “Do not talk loud! Humph! It doesn’t say you can’t sing!” To the tune of “Oh Donna,” he sang to his fiancée, Marcia, but he

23 Lee Humiston et al., Voices from the Dark: A Collection of Poems Written in the Cells of Hanoi, Viet Nam and Peking, China (South Portland, ME: Maine Military Museum, 2007), 77.
25 Ibid., 111.
had barely started when a guard rushed in to close his windows for a week. When Jim Mulligan and Harry Jenkins were moved into Rawhide and placed in stocks, Jenkins lightened the mood by singing his own version of a Gene Autry song: “Whoopi-ty-aye-oh, Rockin’ to and fro, we’re back in the irons again….” Extemporaneous singing like this provided spur-of-the-moment levity and required no musical skill or training.

**Musical Instruments**

One of my cellmates played piano, and I played guitar. So our bunk was just a board on some concrete blocks. So on one side of it we scratched a piano keyboard and on the other side we scratched a guitar with the frets on it. And we would practice making different chords, and different things on our makeshift instruments. It was kind of fun.

– Cecil Brunson, Interview

POWs who came to Vietnam with musical training often found ways to practice their craft, and many who did not already play an instrument chose to learn while in prison. Of course, musical instruments were not generally provided by the Camp Authority, so the Americans used their “Yankee ingenuity” to create their own. Not all of these instruments made sound, but they provided countless hours of distraction and enjoyment.

Charlie Plumb was a music enthusiast with a background in electrical engineering. As the “resident inventor,” he created multiple measurement devices for temperature, weight, time, and more. He was working on a radio when his stash of

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27 Townley, *Defiant*, 314.

materials was discovered by the guards. He used speculative calculations to design a “piano.” He knew that his hand spanned nine notes, so he was able to deductively scratch out three octaves on his bed board. He had never taken piano lessons, but he “practiced scales and chords and simple tunes” until he “could actually hear the notes in [his] mind.” He joked, “I didn’t make much music, but I didn’t make much noise either…. I kept my hands busy and my attention fully committed – and another hour passed.” Plumb also turned a piece of bamboo into a guitar neck so he could practice chords and riffs.

Thomas Kirk practiced flute eight hours a day on a bamboo stick ten inches long. He had a routine, playing from the sound of the gong at seven a.m. until nightfall. He also failed to make actual music with his instrument, but he said, “I was amazed at the technical proficiency I was able to develop in prison on a bamboo stick.”

Bob Shumaker, the second POW in the Hanoi Hilton, had a brilliant mind and many talents. If he had not been captured, he might have been the first man on the moon, as he had been accepted for the astronaut program. He shared a cell with Smitty Harris, the third shootdown. Harris wanted to learn the piano, so Shumaker crafted one for him on a long sheet of toilet paper pasted together with rice and water. He made ink from


30 Charles Plumb, e-mail message to author, February 25, 2016.


32 Plumb, e-mail message to author.


34 Alvarez, Chained Eagle, 140.
matches the POWs scrounged up around the camp and used a burnt bamboo sliver to draw three octaves. Then he wrote out some music on another sheet, using only the treble clef. They stored their rolled piano in a hole in the wall at night, and Harris played silently all day while Shumaker watched for guards. When he finished playing the music Shumaker had written, Harris would “simply turn the sheet upside down and play those notes.”

One of the most popular stories from the Vietnam POWs involves Shumaker and Harris’s piano. Harris tapped to the cell next door and asked Everett Alvarez how he was doing. Alvarez, who was stuck on his bucket with fever and diarrhea, replied, “Lousy. It must be that time of the month.” Harris tapped back, “Cheer up. I’ll play you a tune.” That night, after hours of playing his piano, Harris asked Alvarez, “How’d you like the music?” He replied, “Pretty good for ragtime.” The men got a good laugh, but the piano was found and taken away the next day during a surprise inspection. The day after that, Shumaker and Harris were already hunting for more matchsticks, ready to make another piano.

The skilled musicians who would later lead choirs in Camp Unity provided piano lessons to their cellmates in the early years of the war. Quincy Collins was severely injured when he was shot down, so he walked with a crutch (see fig. 8.1). He drew a

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35 Bob Shumaker, e-mail message to author, August 27, 2015.
36 Ibid.
37 Townley, Defiant, 63.
38 Shumaker, e-mail message to author.
39 Alvarez, Chained Eagle, 140.
40 Ibid., 141.
piano keyboard on his crutch and taught Norman McDaniel the treble and bass clef fingerings.\textsuperscript{41} Kay Russell used the red roof tiles as chalk to draw a keyboard on the cement bed platform so that he could teach a cellmate how to play.\textsuperscript{42}

![Image of Quincy Collins singing during Christmas service in Vietnam Prison]

Figure 8.1. Quincy Collins Sings during Christmas Service in Vietnam Prison. \textit{Source:} Col. Quincy Collins.

None of these “pianos” provided music, or even sound, but John Sexton created an “instrument” that gave him feedback. He used a “snail shell to carve out a set of drumsticks” from bamboo which he tapped on a vine in various tempos and rhythms. He wrote, “When I would get very depressed I would take the sticks and beat them against a tree. I would be whacking away violently and then I would think, ‘What a feeble means to take out your frustrations,’ but the drum beating worked most of the time.”\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{41} J. Quincy Collins, interview by author, Charlotte, NC, February 4, 2016.

\textsuperscript{42} Bill Metzger, e-mail message to author, September 7, 2015.

Guitars were also popular among the POWs who were trying to “stay mentally alive.” Robert Jeffrey was impressed by his cellmates who made a guitar fretboard to practice on from “laminated paper, cloth, and strips of bamboo.” Mike Christian was a country boy from Alabama who grew up without shoes. Before he went to Vietnam, he was passionate about country and western music, buying all the latest records and learning to play them on the guitar. While in prison, Christian crafted five guitars from whatever materials he could find. He made a silent instrument from a bamboo fan, and then “fingered the strings as if he really were playing while humming the chords.” He eventually developed “a sounding board shaped from the box for an old chess set, strings of towel thread twisted together, and two little blocks forced under the strings to make them twang.” He taught Porter Halyburton how to play on his guitar, and he formed a jazz combo with Fred Purrington, who played “the drums” with two sticks. Purrington would use those same drumsticks so he could “lay down the groove for Phil Butler and his Arthur Murray’s dance class” in Camp Unity. Thinking back on that moment, he exclaimed, “What a show!!!!”

These improvised instruments filled the long days with new purpose, but they could never match the feel or the sound of a professionally crafted instrument. Later in

44 Wyatt, *We Came Home*, 280.


46 Ibid., 9.

47 Ibid., 195.

48 Ibid., 9.

49 Ibid., 195.

50 Fred Purrington, e-mail message to author, August 29, 2015.
the war, as treatment improved, the Camp Authority would occasionally bring a guitar to the prisoners in one cell. The men never knew why or how long they would have it, so they took advantage of the opportunity while they could. Charlie Plumb’s cell got a guitar for a few weeks, and nothing could stop them from enjoying it. Plumb recalled, “We broke a string and tied a knot in it to continue playing.”

Jerry Coffee was in a cell with about twenty POWs who had begged the Vietnamese for a Bible or guitar. The Camp Authority quickly delivered a guitar. Coffee said,

All 20 men wanted a shot at the guitar, so we worked out a rotation schedule whereby every man that wanted to had the guitar for about an hour/day. Of course we all learned to play very softly so as not to disturb the others who weren’t playing the guitar, but working on other “projects.” Enough guys had played a little guitar to teach some basics, but no one could really play it with chords and stuff.

Coffee and his cellmates practiced the guitar night and day for a couple months before deciding to compete in a “La Paloma” contest. Each contestant could start over twice, and “the pressure was terrific.” Everett Alvarez was proclaimed the winner.

The guitars made the rounds, reaching most of the POWs in the final months of their imprisonment. Gene Smith remembered his cell getting two guitars, so that he and Bill Butler could play together. Michael Brazelton enjoyed the guitar so much in prison

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51 Plumb, e-mail message to author.
52 Jerry Coffee, e-mail message to author, September 4, 2015.
53 Ibid.
54 Gene Smith, telephone interview with author, August 28, 2015.
that he bought one when he got home. He learned how to play chords and popular melodies, like “Unchained Melody” and “Kansas City,” from his cellmates.55

Cecil Brunson got a “beat-up old guitar” from one of the guards after the peace treaty was signed, and that guitar is now on display at the Hanoi Hilton Museum (see fig. 8.2). Brunson had plenty of time to play while he waited two more months for release. In addition to leading the cellblock’s church services, he played all the popular songs he had sung in his band back home, like Van Morrison’s “Gloria.”56 His cellmate, Rick Bates, claimed that the Vietnamese always requested for Brunson to play The Rolling Stones’ “(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction.” Bates explained, “There were workers who were near our cells and they would look through the bars and make a gesture where the middle finger of one hand slipped between the index and middle finger of the other in a rather sexual connotation. Then they would ask for ‘getno.’”57 While there is no way to know for sure, perhaps the Vietnamese loaned out the musical instruments at least partially for their own entertainment. The use of musical instruments in propaganda will be covered in Part III.

55 Michael Brazelton, e-mail message to author, August 27, 2015.

56 Brunson, interview.

57 Rick Bates, e-mail message to author, September 6, 2015.
Figure 8.2. Guitar Used by POWs in Vietnam, Now Hanging in Hoa Lo Prison Museum, Hanoi, Vietnam. *Source:* Gary Foster.

**Writing Songs**

Humans deliver their most poignant profundities either from the depths of despair or the peaks of ecstasy and when delivered by a poet at the business end of a gun barrel, they end up in a song as often as not.

– Dick Jonas, *The Red-Blooded All-American Boy* 58

In the prisons of North Vietnam, fighter pilots who had lived for the rush of the speed of their aircraft were suddenly halted and forced to be still. These men were proud to be daring, courageous, and cocky – an image familiar today from movies like *Top Gun*. Now the men who had lived on adrenaline were forced to entertain themselves, and

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the results were surprising. In addition to becoming more introspective, the POWs also became more artistic.

Although they may have scoffed at the suggestion before they were shot down, the POWs created and consumed poetry and song lyrics like they were starving for culture. Norm McDaniel wrote, “From time to time I attempted to compose a song or a poem, and my attempts ran the gamut, ranging from love songs and poems to my wife to religious songs. I even included a sonnet on my predicament.” Writing and sharing their work was a popular pastime. John McCain said, “Here’s a bunch of fighter pilots, but a fragment of poetry — some remembered lines, however abbreviated — would be useful.” Bill Lawrence stated, “One of the mind games I played in an attempt to distance myself from the pain and physical misery I was experiencing was to compose poems in my head.” He admitted he was “no Sir Walter Scott,” but his poem, “Oh Tennessee, My Tennessee,” was such a heartfelt ode that it became the state poem.

Some of the poems and lyrics written in Vietnam have been published, but only one song has been published – Quincy Collins’s “POW Hymn.” Most of the POWs’ songs were never meant for public consumption. Their purpose was more immediate and personal. However, the songs tell a story of hope in the midst of pain, of humor in the

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62 John Borling, *Poems for Pilots (and Other People)* (Riverdale, IL, 2010); Humistone, *Voices from the Dark*. 

198
midst of sorrow. These songs demonstrate the daily struggles in the prison camps, the anger of being captured, and the yearning for loved ones back home.

Many books and articles have been written about the music of the Vietnam War, from protest songs to patriotic hymns. Called the “rock and roll war,” its combat was underscored by the popular music of the time, as soldiers listened on the battlefield and screamed along to “We Gotta Get Out of this Place.” Collections of wartime music abound, complete with songs both written by and enjoyed by the infantry, but the songs of the POWs remained unrecorded prior to this project. For a war that is characterized by its music, a vital selection is absent from the history books.

Apart from the music of Quincy Collins, the songs that came out of the prison camps were not on paper. Most of the songwriters were not trained in composition, so they chose “the main technique of composition used by unschooled wartime singers and musicians,” i.e., parody. While the soldiers in the Army and Marines were typically young and drafted, the Air Force and Navy pilots usually had years of training and experience, so the average age of the POW was much higher. Therefore, where the young soldiers parodied current rock and roll hits, the POWs often chose older, more traditional tunes as the basis for their songs.

Ernest Brace, a former Marine who was captured while flying in supplies for the CIA, was the original prisoner of the “Legendary Union of Laotian Unfortunates.” The LULUs were captured in Laos and marched to Hanoi, but Vietnam denied their existence.

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64 Les Cleveland, Dark Laughter: War in Song and Popular Culture (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), 19.
and separated them from the other POWs. Brace was the longest-held civilian prisoner, and he suffered immensely during that time, but he never lost his sense of humor. His song “Rats in the Thatch” is sung to the tune of “Blue Tail Fly,” also known as “Jimmy Crack Corn.” The lyrics mock his captors, making the choice of a minstrel song more poignant since they often mocked slavemasters. Brace joked about being treated like a military prisoner when, in fact, he was simply flying for the money (see ex. 8.1).

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65 Humiston, *Voices from the Dark*, 160.
Example 8.1. Ernest Brace, “Rats in the Thatch”

Rats in the Thatch

“Blue Tail Fly”

Ernest Brace

Traditional

1. You’ll never see our pictures or our names in the press, Cause
2. Now over Laos is a funny little war, And
3. And over in Vietnam they say the flying's fine, The
4. And even in Cuba we were there too, And

if we lose our cover it becomes an awful mess.

it's fought by civilians who don't mind the gore.

Air Force watches for the MiGs, the Marines guard the line.

we lived high in Miami in the Fontainebleau.

They called us Tigers back in forty one,

They get lots of flying, they get lots of time,

Now the Hill Tribe troops need supplies just like you or I,

If you didn't get caught you made lots of cash,

And ever since we fly for cash and not for fun.

But the best thing they get is that good old dollar sign.

And as long as we get paid we'll supply them from the sky.

But if you did get caught even Uncle Sam would have your ass.

Rats in the thatch, but I don't care. It's the Commies in the grass that gave me a scare.

Oh you can keep your medals and you can keep your brass,

Cause all that we fly for is good hard cash.

Another nineteenth-century tune was used as the basis of a parody song remembered by PK Robinson, and possibly written by Ken Johnson. “Gomer, Gomer” was sung to the tune of “Daisy Bell,” and it dealt with the daily frustrations of prisoners
captured after 1970 (see ex. 8.2). They did not suffer the systematic torture, but they still had to beg for adequate nutrition. One prisoner who was thin before his capture lost fifty pounds in five months. Referring to the lyrics, Robinson remarked, “Bananas were rare. Translucent noodles on occasion.”

Example 8.2. Ken Johnson, “Gomer, Gomer”

The second half of the song refers to the daily propaganda broadcasts the men received on the camp radio. Hanoi Hannah always reported that the North Vietnamese

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66 PK Robinson, e-mail message to author, September 23, 2015.

67 Brunson, interview.

68 Robinson, e-mail message to author.
were doing well and the Americans were doing poorly. Robinson explained, “When they talked about shooting down aircraft or theoretically winning a battle, they ‘wiped us out!’ Example: ‘29 B-52’s were wiped out yesterday.’ And that was the ‘horse shit!’” While the former POW admitted the song “wouldn’t sell many records,” he affirmed, “It encompassed our feelings and frustrations.”

The POWs captured near the end of the war were members of a different generation – the Baby Boomers. The marked difference in their attitudes and experiences led to their designation as the “Fucking New Guys” or FNGs, while the original prisoners were called the “Fucking Old Guys” or FOGs. The FNGs had been in college or flight training during the hippie movement. Many of them had played in rock bands before joining the military, whereas the FOGs had more experience with jazz, classical, and big band music. This distinction is visible in the parody songs of the FNGs, which were based on popular rock and roll songs.

Rick Bates remembered prisoners in his cellblock writing parodies of fifties and sixties rock songs and turning them against the Vietnamese. The only one he could recall was sung to the tune of “Teen Angel,” a pop hit from 1959. The song is titled “Dead Gomer,” referencing the derogatory nickname for the North Vietnamese. While the lyrics are morbid and potentially offensive to a non-military audience, Bates claimed the song was “very good for morale” (see ex. 8.3).

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69 Ibid.


71 Bates, e-mail message to author.
Example 8.3. Rick Bates, “Dead Gomer”

Dead Gomer

“Teen Angel”

Another popular rock song was parodied by a couple of young Air Force flyers who were shot down in 1972. Joe Young and Cecil Brunson were involved in a dogfight with some MiGs in thick, layered clouds when a third MiG slipped into the fight and shot them from behind. The Americans never saw it coming, and they were still upset about it when they became cellmates a few weeks later. After talking it out numerous times, they decided to write a song about their last flight to the tune of “Last Kiss.”

In Les Cleveland’s book on music and culture in wartime, he wrote, “The epistolary form is convenient for ballad composers struggling to express their experiences. They seem to feel an intuitive need to bear witness in a very literal way to

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72 Brunson, interview.
the mistakes, terrors and deaths they have encountered and to cite real people and actual events. This is precisely what Young and Brunson did in their “Ballad of Sparrow 3” (see ex. 8.4). They told the full story of their shootdown, reliving the horror in detail and continuing to look for someone to blame for their predicament, wondering why their wingman never alerted them to the danger. They also lamented both their current situation and the loss of their beloved plane. They sang, “From out of nowhere came that fatal blast. We knew our Phantom had flown her last.” The parallels between their tragedy and the loss of a female love in the original song is clear in this personification of the jet. Before writing this song, Brunson had referred to his plane with male pronouns, as seen in this photo he sent home before his shootdown (see fig. 8.3).

Figure 8.3. “This is my horse ‘Phantom’ – He hasn’t thrown me yet.” Photograph of Cecil Brunson Sitting on an F4 Phantom. Source: Cecil Brunson.

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73 Cleveland, *Dark Laughter*, 119.
Example 8.4. Myron “Joe” Young and Cecil Brunson, “Ballad of Sparrow 3”

Ballad of Sparrow 3

Cecil Brunson and Myron Young

Last Kiss

Oh where, oh where can my wing-man be? Was he clearing my

six forme? I sit in Hanoi lonely P.O.W. I wonder where my

wing-man is now.

1. Here is the ballad of a
2. The Gulf of Tonkin was our
3. Near-ing the target clouds

Phantom crew. We flew up north like so many do,
re-fueling track. From here there was no turning back.
ob-scured the ground. Mission com-mander said let’s turn a-round.

To strike North Viet-nam in an F-4 E-
Coast-ing in, could not see land yet.
Spar-row 3 has two MiGs at ten,

- Strike Es-cort called Spar-row 3. The weather was fore-cast
The SAMs be-gan to be a threat. On-ward, On-ward the
Com-ing from high and clos-ing in. Made a hard left, but

bad that day. But we would go there a- ny-way. This
not too tight. I’ve almost got one in my sight. From
Example 8.4. Myron “Joe” Young and Cecil Brunson, “Ballad of Sparrow 3” continued

All the parody songs mentioned so far were based on music the prisoners knew before they were captured, but Bob Flynn had a different experience. As the only POW held in China, he never enjoyed the Voice of Vietnam like the men in Hanoi. Instead, Flynn was bombarded by the daily broadcasts of Radio Peking. Each broadcast would end with the playing of “The Communist Internationale.” Flynn had such contempt for the Communists that he created his own satirical lyrics and proudly sang along with the radio (see ex. 8.5).74 One day the Commissar witnessed this performance and he “was stunned Bob not only knew the words to their great anthem, but would sing it. That is,

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74 Humiston, Voices from the Dark, 141.
until he finished the second stanza and the Commissar realized Bob was mocking them.”75 Flynn was beaten for his insubordination, and from then on, the guards turned off the broadcast before the final song.76 Still, the POW never forgot how his lyrics had humiliated the Chinese, and he gained strength from the powerful anti-Communist message, with the knowledge that his heart and mind were still free.

The two other songs played regularly by the Chinese were “The East Is Red” and “Long Live Chairman Mao” (see ex. 8.6 and 8.7). Both of these songs praise their chairman as a “great leader” and “the people’s savior.”77 Bob Flynn again changed the lyrics to fit his personal assessments of Chairman Mao, often using expletives and calling Mao a “bastard.” His version of “The East Is Red” managed to approximate the sounds of the original, substituting “Dog, frog, hog” for “Dong, fang, hong,” which explains why the Commissar would have thought he was singing the correct words.

75 Humiston, Voices from the Dark, 142.

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid., 144.
Example 8.5. Bob Flynn, “Communist Internationale”

The Communist Internationale

Bob Flynn

Pierre de Geyter

You rotten vermin of the earth
You filthy slogans shouting scum,
Deceitful tyrants, never do wells,
What dirty bastards you’ve become!
Freemen know your slander and your lies,
Your balderdash from Marx to Mao Tse-Tung.
Tomes by Engels, Lenin, Stalin too,
Are but the world’s most blood-stained vulgar dung!
Men of reason sing of Freedom’s light,
While you shoot lies from guns that hate,
And slaughter culture as you kill!
But someday men who you have turned to slaves
Will no longer in your dungeons dwell;
And you can rant as damn you please in red hot flames in Hell!

The East Is Red

Bob Flynn

Traditional

Dog, Frog, Hog, All make dung. But not as rotten much

as Mao Tse-Tung, Chou En-Lai and that rat Lin Piao are all

dirty rotten bastards just like Chairman Mao!
Example 8.7. Bob Flynn, “Whiz on Mao Tse-Tung”

**Whiz on Mao Tse-Tung**

"Long Live Chairman Mao"

Bob Flynn

Anonymous

A car - rion buz - zard flew out of Deutsch - land, In Rus - sia he atesome shit,

Flew in - to Chi - na where he got sick and up - on a flat rock he puked it.

Sun shown up-on it, it commenced to smell worse than a mega - ton of dung.

Sun fi-nally hatched it in-to a crit - ter, Called the bas - tard Mao Tse Tung.

Whiz on Mao Tse - Tung. Whiz on all his dung.

People of the world some-day will form an end - less line

To whiz on the grave of Mao Tse - Tung.
Flynn wrote a second verse for this song, and the words display his contempt for the Communist leader:

Mao calls himself the world’s greatest leader,  
He likens himself to the sun,  
But someday the people of the world will undo him,  
A fitting end to Mao Tse-Tung.  
Mao had no father, Mao had no mother,  
From buzzard puke he was hatched,  
And the whole world will be better off,  
Once the bastard’s been dispatched.\(^{78}\)

These lyrics give the impression that Bob Flynn was a bitter, hateful man, but those who knew him disagreed with this assumption. Trudi Hahn Pickett wrote, “He came out with his sense of humor intact, more likely to start singing ‘You Can’t Roller Skate in a Buffalo Herd’ than to unleash a bitter diatribe about his imprisonment.”\(^{79}\) Describing how soldiers sang through the strangest circumstances, Dick Jonas explained, “He was at war, and war is not the normal human condition. His songs helped him to survive.”\(^{80}\) In other words, Flynn would never have thought to sing those words under normal conditions, but while he was in prison alone, subjected to constant torture and propaganda, his songs were the only way he could fight back. He had to constantly remind himself that the messages his enemy sent were blatant lies, or he risked losing his own core beliefs. As Bull Durham stated, most of the songs written or sung by soldiers were “about the day-to-day fight to survive in a strange land where all the rules were vastly different.”\(^{81}\) With no

\(^{78}\) Bob Flynn, “Whiz on Mao Tse-Tung” in Humiston, *Voices from the Dark*, 145.


\(^{80}\) Jonas, *RBAAB*, iii.

Americans around to keep him in line, Flynn’s day-to-day fight was mainly for his ideologies.

**Composing Original Music**

Quincy, over the years, had been the sparkplug and an ardent worker in providing written music for our Sunday and holiday worship services. Some of his arrangements were based on memory, but he composed much of the music himself. When we were allowed to have pencil and paper, he’d spend day after day arranging music, copying music from memory, or verifying harmony. Without the aid of a musical instrument, the task was indeed difficult.

— Norman McDaniel, _Yet Another Voice_ 82

For one American prisoner, music was not as much a way to fight back as a way to go back. Quincy “The Music Man” Collins found a love of music “before grammar school,” learning to play the piano and flute at a young age. 83 His father played the mandolin, fiddle, and accordion, holding country jam sessions at his furniture stores every weekend. The young Collins “mastered the baritone sax” as a teen and started a dance band called The Southerners which consistently won local and state competitions and played a radio show on Saturdays. Collins formed a drum and bugle corps for parades in his hometown and was the drum major for a marching band, all while in high school.

Throughout his time at the Citadel and his Air Force career, Collins took his horn with him everywhere he went and sang in the local choirs. While in Las Vegas for gunnery school, he joined jam sessions with Louis Prima and Cab Calloway at the Colored Elks Club. Then he became the first Protestant choir director for the Air Force Academy, with one hundred cadets in his choir. Collins noted, “Everywhere I was

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82 McDaniel, _Yet Another Voice_, 61-62.

83 Unless otherwise noted, biographical information comes from J. Quincy Collins, interview by author, Charlotte, NC, February 4, 2016.
assigned, I got involved in music somehow.” Therefore, it is not surprising that he would bring his love of music into the prisons of Vietnam.

Quincy Collins took his music seriously, which is evident in the number of songs he composed in prison and the lengths he went to get them on paper. His “POW Hymn” and religious arrangements were discussed in the “Faith” portion of this paper, but most of his original songs were secular love songs. His sense of humor came through in his impromptu parodies, like “You’re Just a Prisoner of War” substituted for “I’m Just a Prisoner of Love,”\(^84\) but the songs he wrote while in solitary displayed his grief over the long years of separation from his wife and children. Of the thirty-five songs Collins brought out of Hanoi, six of them are original and the rest are choral arrangements of political, religious, and popular songs for four or more voices. See Appendix F for the full list.

After writing arrangements for every military song he could think of, Collins thought back to his time at the Air Force Academy. The prestigious school had adopted the third verse of the existing Air Force song as its alma mater, but Collins believed the cadets deserved to have a special song of their own. He composed two stanzas of poetry full of patriotic fervor and set them to a hymn for four-voice male choir, since at this point, the Air Force Academy did not accept females.

The “Air Force Academy Hymn” (see ex. 8.8) is reminiscent of an old Lutheran hymn, following a similar pattern to “Ein Feste Burg.” Each phrase begins in unison and consists of three measures of quarter notes followed by a dotted half. The long note of the phrase is a tonic chord in all but the third phrase. The melody lies in the Tenor II, while

\(^{84}\) George R. Hall and Pat Hall, *Commitment to Honor: A Prisoner of War Remembers Vietnam* (Jackson, MS: Franklin Printers, 2005), 36.
the Tenor I breaks off from the unison at the end of the phrase to jump a third or sixth above. The Baritone and Bass are often unison, splitting by a fifth or octave to fill out certain chords.

The hymn seems traditional until the third phrase, when Collins used a more modern chord progression. The melody has a carousel-like turning feature while the top voice nearly sings a chromatic scale to create a V/vi, V7/vi, vi, vi7, V/V, V progression. The phrase ends with an unresolved V/vi, returning to the opening theme suddenly. The fourth and final phrase takes the melody above the first tenors and sneaks in a diminished seventh chord while giving the basses and baritones more movement. The optional second ending takes the first tenors to a high A, suggesting that Collins had talented, trained singers in his choir at the Academy. The end result is a beautiful, rousing anthem that has never been adopted, as the Air Force Academy still uses the Air Force song’s third verse.

I am grateful for Col. Collins for showing me the compositions in his possession and allowing me to scan them; all my editions here are taken from these scans.
Example 8.8. Quincy Collins, “Air Force Academy Hymn” continued

proud we are, America, to foster freedom’s light. For
keep their memory close to us in these our fledgling years, and

God and country that’s our way of life, we’ll serve with all our might!

serve with all our might!

spired and without fear.
Quincy Collins spent seven and a half years in a Vietnamese prison, and for many of those years, his wife and children did not know if he was alive. He pined for his Nancy, dreaming of the day he would hold her again. The next two songs show the sequence of events in his life. First, he wrote a heartfelt love song, praying for his love, calling her the star in his sky, fantasizing about the moment they would meet “in a kiss that would start a new life again.” The second song portrays his despair when he learns that Nancy did not wait for him. He asks, “What will I do, now that you’ve left me?”

Collins titled his love song “(My) Nancy (It’s Nancy, She’s My Girl)” and noted that it was written in Hoa Lo Prison (Hanoi Hilton) while in solitary confinement in August of 1971 (see ex. 8.9). The two-measure instrumental intro sets the tone for this sad but hopeful ballad, descending through three minor chords before landing on the dominant. The verse then begins on the tonic (D-flat major) and quickly becomes a master class in jazz chords. Considering that Collins was composing without ever hearing his music, he chose complex harmonies that were not necessary, but his work paid off in a haunting soundscape. The music’s direction is unpredictable, and the chords are often impossible to analyze.

The jarring transition to A-flat major in measure five is evident in the vi-V/vi-vi chord progression which echoes the pain in the voice as he sings, “I’ve been away from her too long.” After five measures in A-flat, the song jumps past D-flat and goes straight to its relative minor. The composer repeated short musical phrases in groups of three (mm. 7-9) to portray his frantic thoughts building up to a peak in measure ten. He used

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86 Quincy Collins, “(My) Nancy (It’s Nancy, She’s My Girl).”

87 Quincy Collins, “What Will I Do?”
the same technique in the verses starting in measure thirteen, but this time the phrases are meant to ease his worries as he reaffirms himself that someone above is watching over his wife. Each phrase begins in a different key (D-flat, C-flat, A) while the melody lowers each time. The first verse ends back in B-flat minor as the words “she’s my girl” rise at the end like a question. The second verse remedies this by putting that phrase in major with a declamatory downward leap.

The composer provided an “alternative interpretation” for the verses, wherein each beat moves forward one beat, making the pick-up become the downbeat. This would occur in measures 13-18, 21-26, and 37-42. The dotted half at the end of the phrase becomes a half note, so that “It’s Nancy, she’s my girl” always falls with “Nancy” on the downbeat. Although this interpretation does not radically change the song, it gives the verses a swing-like flair.

The chorus begins in measure 29 and a distinct tonal center is not noticeable. Instead, the song appears to bounce around through several keys. The ascending notes tend to be minor, perhaps portraying the struggle leading to their reunion. The climax of each phrase is high and major, depicting the joy they will share. The chorus evokes a jazz ballad from the forties, which could be part of Collins’s inspiration for this song.
Example 8.9. Quincy Collins, “(My) Nancy (It’s Nancy, She’s My Girl)"

(My) Nancy
It's Nancy, She's My Girl

Quincy Collins

How can our love stand true and strong?

I've been away from her too long,

Though a heart that's torn by war's separation

long and fruitless years my love you're still the one I'm dreaming of. Someone is watching from above for Nancy, she's my girl!

mem'ries now begin to fade, all life seems cast in endless shade, shining is the star he made, it's Nancy, she's my girl!

Some day soon our lips will meet again in a kiss that will start a new life again.

Ending all these years of loneliness with one caress, our hearts confess, no
Example 8.9. Quincy Collins, “(My) Nancy (It’s Nancy, She’s My Girl)” continued

The song that portrays Collins’s heartbreak over the loss of his wife is much simpler in style and substance (see ex. 8.10). “What Will I Do?” is marked as “Ad Lib Ballad Style or Easy Latin,” but it is doubtful that anyone would ever dance to this piece. Compared to his other songs, this one feels simplistic, which makes sense because he was writing this for himself, to release his emotions, rather than for the enjoyment of others. This song is also reminiscent of a forties ballad, specifically a song written by Irving Berlin and recorded by Nat King Cole and Frank Sinatra with an almost identical name – “What’ll I Do?” The similarities go beyond the name, however, with a vocally-driven song of forlorn and pensive subject matter in the key of C major. Both songs even set the first words to triplets. This is not to suggest that Collins copied Berlin, but it is possible that Collins heard this song while in prison, since several POWs reported hearing Sinatra on the camp radio.

Even when Collins wrote from despair, he refused to settle for the easiest compositional methods. He wrote both a melodic accompaniment and chords for this song, and he continued to lean toward his jazz roots when choosing those chords. Where Irving Berlin started his song on C and generally used the tonic, subdominant, and dominant chords, Collins started his song on D with a CM9 opening chord. He slowly continues up and down the scale, taking chords that do not fit any typical progression and
making them flow together (I-ii-iii-flat iii-ii-flat ii-I). Throughout the first verse, he never employs a simple triad, electing to add sevenths and ninths to every chord. The third phrase (m. 9) is the first and only time this piece reaches the subdominant, first with a major seventh and then with a diminished seventh, and the dominant is never used.

While in prison, Collins could never hear what he was composing, but he got that chance when he was released and sent to Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines. The Air Force provided him with a musician to help him write down all his songs on something other than Vietnamese toilet paper. While they worked feverishly to put all thirty-five songs on staff paper, Collins heard many of them for the first time. During this time, it seems either Collins or the unnamed musician decided the accompaniment on “What Will I Do?” was inadequate, so the musician prepared his own arrangement (see fig. 8.4).

This is the only song from the Hanoi Hilton available in two versions. The melody is identical, but the accompaniment has some subtle changes that make the song feel more open. RW, the arranger (we know only his initials), keeps Collins’s basic framework, starting with CM9 and going to Dm7, but he slips an Am7 in between. After the Dm7, he adds an FM7, giving the first phrase a I-vi-ii-IV progression. The original walk down the scale is maintained between the phrases, but the arranger substitutes a G7-9 for the first CM7 in the second phrase, so the CM7 at the end of the phrase feels like a landing point. At the end of the verse, RW adds Am9 and G11 to build a iii-vi-ii-V-I progression, giving a finality to the first verse and making it clear that another verse has begun. The untrained ear would hardly notice a difference between the original and RW’s arrangement, but the latter sounds more polished, more musical, which is probably not a trait Collins was considering as he composed this song.
Example 8.10. Quincy Collins, “What Will I Do?”

What Will I Do?

Quincy Collins

What can I say

Db7+9

Cmaj7 Em7 Dm7 Cmaj7

to have you near?

Each moment away from your kisses how my

heart beats inside, just to have you in my arms holding you tight.

Believe me, how I need you to be forever, Close by my side

Cmaj7 C6 Dm7 Em7 Ebm7 Dm9
Example 8.10. Quincy Collins, “What Will I Do?” continued

22 D♭7+9 Cmaj7 Em7 Dm7 Cmaj7 Fmaj7 E7

to see me through. The torment of living without you is

27 Fmaj7 Fdim7 Dm9 Dm7 D♭7 C6 Em7

more than my poor heart can stand, so I ask you again, what will I do?

35 Dm7 D♭7+9 C69
Figure 8.4. Quincy Collins, “What Will I Do?” Arranged by RW
The final original song by Quincy Collins seems to fall somewhere between the previous two pieces chronologically, but this is a conjecture based on the lyrics. “If I Love” (see ex. 8.11) is another jazz ballad in the key of C with three verses and a bridge of eight measures each. The verses are misleading, implying that this is a love song fit for the naïveté of Romeo and Juliet. Simple words devoid of emotional depth repeat the promise that he will love only her.

The bridge, however, betrays his uncertainty in his relationship. He sings, “Words so addle, actions strange, thoughts are so confused.” This appears to relate to letters Collins received from his wife. Before he knew it was over, he must have gotten hints that their love was falling apart. He sensed her pulling away from him through the lines on the page. He wanted his assumptions to be wrong, but he knew to “trust the feeling” that his heart was being used. Still, he went back to the verse which now sounds more like a pep talk. His heart “keeps on repeating” that she is the only one for him, but his final iteration of “It will be you” ends on a high B natural over a CM7 accompaniment. The dissonance makes his statement sound like a question. There is no finality or confidence in the message he claimed many times to know for sure. The composer’s state of mind is also evident in his harmonic choices. Collins used the same key, same chords, and same progressions as he did in “What Will I Do?” Although “If I Love” is in C major, the most commonly used chord is D minor, which is often used as part of a chromatic progression up and down the scale. Collins only wrote two songs in this manner, and both of them concern the loss of his wife.
Example 8.11. Quincy Collins, “If I Love”

Quincy Collins

If I love, I’m sure it will be you. My heart just seems to tell me, that it must be true.

If I dream, of love the whole night through, I know, dear, without question, heart keeps on repeating.

If I love, I’m sure it will be true, my heart just seems to tell me, that it must be true.

Words so odd, actions strange, thoughts are so confused. Still I trust the feeling, my heart is being used, my darling.

Quincy Collins may not be the only POW who wrote original music in prison, but he is the only one who has written down his compositions. His songs and arrangements show an incredible range of styles and formats. Most POWs did not have the training or experience to compose high caliber, multi-voice works suitable for competitive choirs. Most POWs were limited in talent and knowledge of theory and composition. This
limitation may have discouraged other writers of original songs from sharing their creations. However, limited talent did not stop the men from entertaining each other once they lived in larger groups. The next chapter will evaluate the use of music in community entertainment.
Chapter Nine

Music as Entertainment

While we had to face the pressure of torture every day from the outside, it was the war inside – the battle against boredom, depression, anxiety, and the problem of just plain living together – that had its effect as well.

– Eugene McDaniel, *Before Honor*¹

Whether a prisoner of war lived in solitary confinement or in a large cell full of other men, he had a lot of time to kill and no external sources of entertainment. Joe Kittinger wrote, “We all dealt with the empty days and empty nights in our own ways. Keeping ourselves entertained and mentally alert was something we worked at.”² Dick Stratton shared a memory that encompassed the extent of the POWs’ tedium:

I was laying on the floor on my bed board and Doug [Hegdahl] was skipping, yes, skipping around the room. I asked: “Doug, what are you doing?” He paused for a moment, looked me in the eye and cryptically said: “Skipping, Sir” and continued to skip. A stupid question, a stupid answer. After a moment, I again queried: “What ya doin’ that for?” This stopped him for a moment. He paused and cocked his head thoughtfully, smiled and replied: “You got anything better to do, Sir?” I didn’t. He continued skipping.³

Boredom was an enemy in itself, and the POWs went to great efforts to defeat it. In his book *The Anatomy of Captivity*, John Laffin listed the four methods for fighting boredom: the physically creative, the physically active, the intellectual, and the imaginative.⁴ The

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next two chapters will demonstrate the many ways the POWs used music to combat the monotony, both physically and mentally.

When the first POWs were released from North Vietnam, they refused to talk about their torture, fearing it might hinder the release of the remaining prisoners. However, their interviews consistently emphasized “the importance of organization, discipline, and some kind of creative and energy-consuming activity for people in an alien world.”

Robert Certain noted, “One of our biggest battles was against boredom.” He made a deck of cards out of toilet paper. Porter Halyburton and Jeremiah Denton “needed to relieve [their] boredom and loneliness,” so they made chess boards out of that same paper and created a full court from pawns to kings out of bread (see fig. 9.1). What Laffin referred to as “imaginative,” the POWs called “Yankee ingenuity.” Robert Jones stated, “Any small stick, piece of paper, rock, nail, or bone was made into something useful…. The list could go on and on about the efforts we made to keep our minds active, to learn, entertain ourselves, pay tribute, or just pass the time.”

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5 “POWs Offer Lesson in Living,” Memphis Commercial Appeal, n.d.


Cards, dice, and board games provided recreation for a small group of POWs, but when fifty men lived together in one room, they needed ways to entertain everyone at once. This created a new dynamic, with a few prisoners performing for a larger audience. In later years, those with theatrical experience would put on lavish shows, but the inexperienced and untalented POWs were often the most amusing. David Gray claimed that his contribution “was to play the court jester,” which he accomplished by reenacting eight movies and performing a weekly skit called “Frat Man and Rock,” based on the Batman characters. When Gray moved to Dogpatch, he began to tell a story to his six cellmates, and popular demand led him to continue improvising the story long after he completed the original plot. He joked, “Thus the POW soap opera was born.” All seven
of the POWs participated in the cast of over one hundred characters, including “heroes, goats, and sex symbols galore.”

The Americans also found entertainment outside their cells, as they observed a different culture through their peepholes. Everett Alvarez got his “fill of laughs” every morning at dawn when the jailers assembled for exercise. He wrote,

> At the beat of the gong they mustered, yawning and slovenly, dressed only in their underwear. The weirdest music, without form or melody, blared out of the loudspeakers. At intervals it faded out and a man’s voice took over, sounding almost like someone yawning or exhaling loudly: “Aahhhh! Mahhhhh! Oooohhhhh!” The voice alternated in volume with the music as the turnkeys stretched and whirled in the most bizarre of uncoordinated acrobatics. They pranced around, stood stock still in new positions, and giggled as they tried to catch each other. It was the Keystone Cops reincarnated in a courtyard of Southeast Asia.

Alvarez later learned that the guards were practicing tai-chi, but for him, it was a comic relief that got him out of bed despite his physical condition.

Another POW was transported from his misery by a “lilting song” outside his peephole. Charles Plumb recounted the experience:

> The voice was tender and beautiful. I knew that a bath area was only a short distance from our wall and, not having seen a female for a long time, I sprang to the window. My hopes were encouraged as a sweet fragrance drifted into our stale cell. Although the crack in the wood was at such a poor angle I could not see the bath area well, I peeped anyway. A pair of dainty feet stepped into view. “Hey!” I whispered to my mate. “Come here!” Both of us glued our eyes to cracks, muttering a “Come on!” to ourselves as the feet moved back and forth. A small, shapely hand placed a pink bar of scented soap on the ledge, “Come on! Come on!”

> We gasped. It was too much. I thought of those teasing knee-on-down camera angles of a 1960 movie - and in color. Bright-red bikini panties fell to her feet! The siren song continued. We breathed harder. Closer! Closer! She came closer. Her knees, her thighs, her...her...

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His!...how utterly disgusting!
Yes, there he was, a Vietnamese soldier, waltzing around with nothing on but perfume.\textsuperscript{11} Plumb and his cellmate may not have gotten the view they had hoped for, but they probably had more excitement that day than they had experienced in months.

Humorous diversions like these were the only times when the POWs appreciated the music of the Vietnamese. Though many of the guards provided music from an instrument, Charlie Plumb claimed they just “fiddled around.” He wrote, “A few could play, and many would try to play, a bamboo flute or a guitar or mandolin. Regardless of their talent, most of the sounds they produced were, to me, noise.”\textsuperscript{12} The Americans quickly learned that if they wanted music that was pleasing to their ears, they would have to provide it themselves.

Musical performances by prisoners of war were a common phenomenon for centuries before the Vietnam War. Writing about World War I, Pat Reid stated, “Music can be a great solace and concerts, whether orchestral or choral, were a useful way of taking people’s minds off the fact of their captivity. The listener is transported into a world of pure beauty without the element of make-believe inherent in the theatre.”\textsuperscript{13} In the \textit{Encyclopedia of Prisoners of War and Internment}, Jonathan Vance wrote, “The soothing quality of music has been recognized for centuries, and prisoners of war through


\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 113.

the ages have found great consolation in it…. Even in the most brutal of camps, the human voice could give comfort and hope where there was little else.”

In his entry on “Music,” Vance discussed everything from the Civil War prisoner who created and sold violins to the professional musicians in the concentration camps of Nazi Germany, performing Beethoven sonatas and string quartets and composing full operas. He did not mention the prisoners in Vietnam even once in that section. Perhaps he only considered something music if it actually made sound, which is something the Vietnam POWs were rarely allowed to do.

Vance wrote of humanitarian organizations shipping musical instruments to prisoners in the twentieth century, but if these organizations sent instruments to Vietnam, the POWs never received them. An information brochure for families of POWs listed suggestions for care packages, including playing cards, Bibles, and harmonicas. None of these items reached their intended recipients. Since the prisoners of previous wars had access to sheet music and musical instruments, the performance quality in some camps was almost professional. The Vietnam POWs could hardly create an orchestra out of toilet paper pianos and bed board guitars. They were typically limited to their voices, and their voices were typically silenced.

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15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.


18 Vance, Encyclopedia of Prisoners of War.
Spontaneous music was uncommon once the prisoners were together in large cells. Most performances were planned and rehearsed. An impromptu act was likely offered as a humorous distraction rather than a refined work of art. Joe Crecca recalled waltzing around Room 4 with Ed Mechenbier singing “How Little We Know,” with their steps perfectly timed to reach Ron Bliss as they sang the line, “How ignorant bliss is.” These lighthearted jokes delivered a nice chuckle, but it would take much more to placate a group of fifty men every day for years. For this reason, “hardly a night passed in these large cells without some form of entertainment being provided by someone.”

Movies, Musicals, and Commercials

We had some riotous times laughing at some of the silly little things that happened. I think I may have laughed harder in prison than I have ever laughed at anything in my life. We put on some skits and some commercials that were really hilarious. Often we would be poking fun at another roommate, but we all got our turn and everyone seemed to take it in good spirit.

– Larry Chesley, Seven Years in Hanoi

Onboard a naval vessel, the movie officer would play a film every night after dinner, and the Navy pilots brought this tradition to the POW camps. Each cell had a rotation of movie officers, but the man presenting a movie had “no film, no projector, no screen – just his memory and skill.” Dick Francis said, “Probably the highest form of entertainment was someone telling a movie (basically scene for scene).” He added, “As a whole, I think the guys preferred the ‘R’ rated movies.” The prisoners took their task

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19 Joe Crecca, e-mail message to author, September 19, 2015.


21 Larry Chesley, Seven Years in Hanoi: A POW Tells His Story (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, Inc., 1973), 79.

seriously, preparing for days so they could “vividly describe scenes and develop themes.”

In some cells, the movies averaged ninety minutes, while in others the movies became long productions. Ted Guy recalled that his favorite, Dr Zhivago, took two sessions of two hours. Paul Galanti remembered that Russ Temperly took six weeks to tell War and Peace. John Nasmyth claimed, “Some men were so good at describing films they had seen that we would listen to their re-runs! Old movies that would have lasted for three hours might be expanded to five as they were told in such detail.” Some POWs were so adept at reenacting scenes that their performances were remembered decades later, like John McCain and Orson Swindle’s rendition of One-Eyed Jacks and the infamous line when Marlon Brando called Slim Pickens a “scum-sucking pig.” Harry Jenkins “delivered a particularly fine rendition” of North by Northwest, making up most of the story. Repatriated POWs would later call his bluff after watching the movie.

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23 Dick Francis, e-mail message to author, August 31, 2015.


27 Wyatt, We Came Home, 389.


The movies themselves were not musical, but some prisoners who knew more about music than movies figured out a way to participate. Ray Alcorn said, “Some of us who were not movie buffs decided these must be TV movies which needed commercials to make them complete.”30 This led to a new genre of parody music in the POW camps: jingles. Paul Galanti’s “hidden talent,” instantly creating a jingle at the mention of a product, became the foundation of the Golden Guinea Advertising & Plumbing Corporation. Working with Bill Butler and his singers, Galanti produced a new commercial almost every night for two years. He boasted, “They were clever, they were funny, and they were multi-lingual. It was a tremendous mental exercise to write funny singing commercials in a foreign language keeping the meter intact and having it rhyme.”31 He shared one of the few family-friendly commercials, featuring the Cisco Kid and Pancho. As the cowboys galloped away from the sheriff, Pancho said, “Hey, Cisco, We got to get outta her, Mon. Dese horses, dey ain’t fast enough!” Cisco replied, “Hey Pancho! Look up there. It’s an hombre with a Ferrari.”32 Cisco, Pancho, the sheriff, and the man with the Ferrari then sang the jingle in four-part harmony, which unfortunately is no longer available. The original song is Peggy Lee’s “Manana (see ex. 9.1).

30 Ray Alcorn, e-mail message to author, August 30, 2015.

31 Galanti, “Golden Guinea Advertising.”

32 Ibid.
It is fascinating that prisoners in different rooms, different buildings, and different camps often came up with the same ideas. Comic commercials were popular in many of the large rooms in Camp Unity. Myron Donald remembered “catcalls and funny lines” in his room’s commercials. Larry Chesley guaranteed that his room’s commercials would

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33 Galanti, “Golden Guinea Advertising.”

“beat any you’ve seen on TV.” He added, “They might not have been very funny to others, but they were funny to us.”

Ray Alcorn put a caveat on his commercials, saying “We were a group of young, energetic men with great imaginations, who had been locked away from society for several years. This greatly influenced what products we advertised which should never be discussed in polite company.” When pressed if he would share with impolite company, he opened up a bit more. “The skits and jingles were ALWAYS of a sexual nature,” he wrote. “We had one guy who had a high voice who would play the part of the girl. Always had to have a female involved. He/she would have a small towel over the head to represent long hair and a blanket wrapped around the waist as a skirt.” Alcorn revealed one of his risqué jingles, a commercial for the fictional product “Vibra Finger” (see ex. 9.2). Hundreds of similar jingles were never committed to paper and are now considered lost.

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36 Alcorn, e-mail.

37 Ibid.
What started as short jingles in short commercials during movie intermissions would grow over the next few years. At first, “New York alternated with Hollywood” when Al Stafford would tell Broadway musicals in the way other men told movies. Then music was worked into skits in “low-cost” productions of about fifteen minutes. These skits would evolve into “full-blown spectaculars” by the end of the war, with ratings up to XXX.\(^39\) The most elaborate productions were limited to cells with the talent and leadership required.

Room Four was able to stage *South Pacific* one fourth of July thanks to the incredible mind of Al Brudno, who remembered every word.\(^40\) This cell had a twelve-man choir led by the gifted Bill Butler, and during their two years together, they produced two musicals, the second being *The Sound of Music*. Larry Chesley was not a

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\(^{38}\) Alcorn, e-mail.

\(^{39}\) Craig Howes, *Voices of the Vietnam POWs: Witnesses to Their Fight* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 123.

\(^{40}\) Gene Smith, telephone interview with author, August 28, 2015.
singer, but he found the musicals very entertaining, “with costumes, ‘girlies,’ and everything.” He explained,

The Vietnamese did not like us to sing because they thought it meant disorder, but we put on the musicals any way. One man would narrate the scenes and then some of the guys would come out and sing in high-pitched voices for the girls’ parts and other men would sing the male parts. I was not in these productions because I was not a singer, but I did enjoy them very much.42

Lee Ellis said *South Pacific* was “one of the highlights of the year, giving us some fun and taking our minds off our plight, lifting our spirits for a few days.” He had auditioned for the show but admitted, “It was obvious to all – including me – that my singing would not enhance the performance, so I enjoyed it as a spectator from my comfortable seat on the elevated concrete slab.” Mo Baker proudly proclaimed, “I was the sailor that sang ‘Honey Bun.’” He said that he and four other POWs practiced twice a week for months to put the show together. He quipped, “The cell mates loved it. Especially to see some of the warrior buddies in drag.”44

The production of a Broadway musical in a cell in Hanoi was a tremendous feat. They had to scrounge for costumes and props from their meager resources. A female character might have worn “straw brooms for hair and wadded clothing to create an enormous bustline.” Unlike the prisoners of so many wars before, these men did not have sheet music or instruments. They did not have a libretto or recording to remind them

41 Chesley, *Seven Years in Hanoi*, 79.

42 Heslop, *From the Shadow of Death*, 59.


44 Mo Baker, e-mail message to author, September 16, 2015.

45 Plumb, *I’m No Hero*, 240.
of a forgotten word or scene. One man taught another until he was ready to play the part.

Musical entertainment was only possible because of musical education, which is the subject of the next chapter.
Chapter Ten

Music Education

When not occupied in sleep, delirium, or the desire for personal introspection, [Donald] Cook and [Doug] Ramsey often talked about anything mentally stimulating like the dialectics of Hegelian reasoning. Citing Coach Paquin, Cook compared life to football in lofty spiritual terms. Citing master composers and legendary characters from the great operas, Ramsey compared music and its composition to life. Some of their other weighty subjects of discussion included: the potential of the universe and what lay behind its creation; the possibility of immortality or repetitive reincarnations; the likelihood and nature of either an already fully-developed deity or an enduring transcendental development of a constantly-evolving deity.

– Donald Price, The First Marine Captured in Vietnam

Just as a blind person often develops his or her other senses to compensate, the American prisoners found that a body in chains can gain access to long-lost memories and enhanced mental functions. During his first few months in solitary confinement, Harry Jenkins recalled the name and face of every student in every class he had ever taken. After years alone with their thoughts and memories, the POWs were desperate for someone to share the burden of their recollected knowledge. James Stockdale vividly described this need:

When you’re alone and afraid and feel your culture is slipping away even though you’re hanging on to your memories—memories of language, of poetry, of prayers, of mathematics—hanging on with your fingernails as best you can and yet, despite all your efforts, still seeing the bottom of the barrel coming up to meet you and realizing how thin and fragile our veneer of culture is, when you suddenly realize the truth that we all can become animals when cast adrift and tormented for a mere matter of months, you start having some very warm thoughts about the only life preserver within reach—that human mind, that human heart next door.


3 James Bond Stockdale, Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1995), 7.
The men had a simple goal—“to stay mentally alive”—and education was a simple answer.\textsuperscript{4} The process of sharing knowledge, however, was not a simple task. While they were still separated, the men would spend countless hours tapping lessons through the walls, teaching each other foreign languages, music history, and everything in between.\textsuperscript{5}

Cut off from the outside world, the prisoners were “hungry for knowledge.”\textsuperscript{6} They were ecstatic when they learned of the lunar landing via a sugar packet, a year after the event occurred.\textsuperscript{7} They were limited to the knowledge they brought in with them, which makes their education program even more incredible. Many POWs wrote and spoke of their desperation for information. Everett Alvarez said the men “craved any form of mental stimulus.”\textsuperscript{8} Wilfred Abbott wrote, “A constant battle was to keep our minds active.”\textsuperscript{9} Mental health was a common concern for these men after years in isolation, and education helped them keep their minds sharp.\textsuperscript{10} Robert Timberg explained, “The appetite for knowledge was insatiable, not merely as a diversion but as an intellectual

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\textsuperscript{6} Wyatt, \textit{We Came Home}.

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{9} Wyatt, \textit{We Came Home}, 11.

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stimulant, a device to keep their minds from going to seed.”\textsuperscript{11} Alvin Townley detailed how the hardliners in Alcatraz shared clandestine lessons through the walls, “enriching each other’s minds even as their bodies wasted away.”\textsuperscript{12}

Education also improved their mental health by providing hope that their lives would continue outside of the prison.\textsuperscript{13} Robert Naughton equated their “general quest for knowledge” with a desire for self-improvement which continued after release, as many former POWs sought additional schooling.\textsuperscript{14} Eugene McDaniel professed, “I still believe I learned more in those classes than I did in college at home; in camp, the motivation was there.”\textsuperscript{15} The knowledge obtained in the prison camps proved useful after release, as well. For example, Bob Jeffrey tested out of French, German, and Spanish after studying the languages in prison, earning twenty-one college credits.\textsuperscript{16} Don Heiliger claimed he wooed his wife, an English major, by reciting poetry for six hours without repeating himself, all of which he memorized in prison.\textsuperscript{17}

In addition to occupying and edifying their minds, education required “resisting and triumphing over enemy rules,” which boosted their self-confidence and unified their


\textsuperscript{12} Townley, \textit{Defiant}, 206.


\textsuperscript{16} Wyatt, \textit{We Came Home}, 280.

\textsuperscript{17} Donald L. Heiliger, interview by James McIntosh, 1999, interview OH293, transcript, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, Madison, WI, 61.
While the Geneva Convention obliged the Vietnamese to “encourage the practice of intellectual, educational, and recreational pursuits,” and to “ensure the exercise thereof by providing them with adequate premises and necessary equipment,” the Camp Authority denied this right to the Americans by banning scholastic activities and destroying any instructive materials. The POWs created foreign language dictionaries with up to 25,000 words which were eventually discovered and removed by the guards. The prisoners would react by creating new ones which were “bigger and better each time.” This rebellious act required tenacity and teamwork, forging stronger bonds between the soldiers.

Hanoi University

When the POWs were consolidated in Hanoi, an entire “college” was formed. One man was appointed “dean,” and it was his job to find out which men had special knowledge in some subject that they could teach to other POWs, to assign classroom space and to schedule courses.

– Richard Jones, *Army: Bending the Spirit: Mind Control in POW Camps*

Tapping through walls was not the most efficient method of education. Bob Shumaker taught French to Sam Johnson in this manner, allowing Johnson to learn ten words per week. He noted, “If the pessimists were right about the war, I figured I’d be conversant by the time of our release.” Halfway through the war, the academic pace

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20 Heiliger, interview, 60.

21 Ibid.


23 Jones, “Bending the Spirit.”

24 Sam Johnson and Jan Winebrenner, *Captive Warriors: A Vietnam POW’s Story* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1992), 166.
was boosted when the prisoners were consolidated in Camp Unity. Paul Galanti recalled, “A society was born from the rubble of spirits smashed in solitary confinement or four souls stuffed into a seven by seven-foot individual cell. We got organized immediately—the Senior Ranking Officer in each room was identified and immediately appointed a chain of command.”

Each SRO had to organize a large group of men locked night and day in a fairly small area before chaos ensued. SRO Claude Clower “realized that things could get dicey” without activities to fill the time. In an “atmosphere of growing tension, and the real fear that some of the men might try to organize an escape or even storm the walls,” the men launched a learning program called “Hanoi University.”

“No group of POWs before or since has been so prepared to teach on such a wide variety of subjects. Eighty percent of the prisoners in North Vietnam were college graduates and twenty percent had advanced degrees. With many Air Force and Naval Academy graduates, the pilots were highly educated in mathematics and engineering. Other POWs brought their expertise in scholastic, artistic, and trade specialties. Initially, the most popular subjects were foreign languages, especially French, Spanish, German, and Russian, but never Vietnamese. Bob Shumaker’s math lessons drew a large crowd

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27 McDaniel, Before Honor, 141.

28 Ibid., 142.


which “eventually calculated trigonometric tables—sine, tangent, cosine—for every angle between zero and 90 degrees.” Science classes included biology, electricity, geology, psychology, sociology, and “even the sex lives of bees.” Practical training included car repair, stock market, real estate, and marriage seminars.

As the prisoners gained a sense of stability in their new home, they turned to more creative pursuits. The subjects were determined by whether someone knew them well enough to teach them and whether the other POWs showed interest in learning them. Athletic classes provided lectures on archery, surfing, skiing, and golf. A selection of “less academic” courses included “hunting, gun classes, camping, stereo, photography,” and more. A few classes covered the more exotic specialties of “meat cutting, duplicate bridge,” and “how toothpicks are made.” McDaniel recalled, “By the time we had fully organized, we were teaching fifty-five to sixty different subjects.”

31 Townley, *Defiant*, 318.


34 Naughton, *Motivational Factors*, 37.


36 Wyatt, *We Came Home*, 281, Heiliger, interview, 79.


38 Wyatt, *We Came Home*, 11.


Each large cell in Camp Unity conducted its education program uniquely, since the prisoners could not easily communicate between the rooms. In Spike Nasmyth’s cell, the students would gather in a corner at the city’s six o’clock horn every morning.41 Charlie Plumb’s room started school with an imaginary bell at 9:30.42 Some rooms assigned a different POW to provide a lecture each night,43 while other had faculties of up to ten professors.44 The amount of time spent in class varied greatly, with some holding two classes of one hour each four nights a week,45 and others devoting ten hours a day to their education.46 The average course load was three to five hours a day, with some on a rotating schedule such as Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday.47

Selecting subjects and scheduling classes were simple tasks compared to teaching the courses without any textbooks or references. Lee Ellis explained how the POWs provided expert instruction from memory alone:

The lack of books or outside resources did not limit our continuous learning in the POW camps. We relied on recall of past education. Where there was a lack of clarity on a subject, we tried to get a consensus of the best minds. Eventually many areas were codified into what we called “Hanoi Fact”—meaning it was accepted as true until we were released and could verify the information. The in-house joke was that some men whose education had been slighted before capture

41 Wyatt, *We Came Home*, 389.
42 Plumb, *I’m No Hero*, 85.
44 Boyd, “Prison Camp Diary.”
and now proudly posed as experts had been totally educated by Hanoi Fact. Fortunately, it turned out that our facts were amazingly accurate.\textsuperscript{48} The mental acuity developed in prison allowed the Americans to access memories and information they had long thought were lost.\textsuperscript{49} Gaining new knowledge also proved to be easier. Paul Galanti noted, “Since there were no books or writing materials, all subject matter had to be memorized which came easily to most of us after so much time in solitary confinement.”\textsuperscript{50}

Teaching aids were rare, “except for those so ingeniously designed and hidden from the Vietnamese” by the POWs.\textsuperscript{51} Dark cement floors became blackboards and red roof tiles were used as chalk.\textsuperscript{52} Foreign language dictionaries and class notes were recorded on toilet paper with ink made from cigarette ashes. Although their stockpile of written information was destroyed every six months or so, the men “would start again, from scratch, the tedious process of recording on toilet paper all the information [they] could remember.”\textsuperscript{53} Since some subjects are easier to teach and learn with pencils and paper, Charlie Plumb often dreamed of “entering shops containing nothing but rows and rows of pencils,” a commodity he would never again take for granted. Regardless of the

\textsuperscript{48} Ellis, \textit{Leading with Honor}, 123.

\textsuperscript{49} \textit{U.S. News & World Report}, “Inside North Vietnam’s Prisons.”


\textsuperscript{51} Wyatt, \textit{We Came Home}, 216.

\textsuperscript{52} \textit{U.S. News & World Report}, “Inside North Vietnam’s Prisons.”

limitations of a prison classroom, Plumb exclaimed, “No one could imprison our minds and our thoughts.”

The prisoners were desperate to learn and happy to do any work the “professor” asked of them. Henry Barrows boasted of his class, “Attendance was 100% and I must confess, all my students received good grades.”

Eugene McDaniel recalled learning Russian from the labels on fish tins, saying “the ‘homework’ between classes was to memorize the words on the labels to keep our minds busy in the lull periods.”

Phil Butler had previously worked as an Arthur Murray instructor, so he taught his cellmates social dancing. Though a handful of the guys were too embarrassed to participate, Don Heiliger recalled, “The rest of us said hey, that’s great, we’ll learn anything.”

Dance classes were popular in Cell 7, where George McKnight taught the Charleston and jitterbug. The entire room cleared the floor and kicked up their feet to prepare for the dancing they would surely enjoy upon their release.

The hardline resisters in Seven were unafraid of the consequences, but other prisoners considered the endeavor too risky. Mike Kerr wanted to learn how to dance because “his wife loved it and he had three left feet.” Quincy Collins agreed to teach the rhythmically-challenged pilot, but he could not recruit any help from his cellmates who feared reprisal if the guards found them in each other’s arms. Despite the frustration at Kerr’s lack of skill and

54 Plumb, I’m No Hero, 85.

55 Wyatt, We Came Home, 43.

56 McDaniel, Before Honor, 141.

57 Heiliger, interview, 79.

the pain of crushed toes, Collins pledged, “I was going to make it happen for him if it was the last thing I did on this earth. Unity Before Self.” He explained, “Music can lift one’s spirits no matter where you are and dancing while holding the one you love ain’t bad either.” Alas, after all their hard work, Mike Kerr returned home to find that his wife had left him for someone else.59

Private vocal lessons were also a common request among the inmates. A POW asked Ray Alcorn to help him sing “You’ll Never Walk Alone.” Alcorn said, “We started out singing scales which drove our other cellmates to threaten physical harm if we didn’t stop.” His pupil “tried and tried, but never really came close to a recognizable tune.”60 Gene Smith attempted to help a cellmate sing bass in his choir, but the man “couldn’t carry a tune,” so Smith would “point up and down, until he hit the right note.”61 An anonymous POW tried to sing in Bill Butler’s choir, but he “was fired for incompetence.” Butler apparently declared him “totally musically illiterate and incapable of ever learning to sing,” calling him his first failure ever.62

Music Theory

The mark of a truly educated man, was if you were all alone, and you found yourself all alone and without communication with others, would you be able to recreate your civilization from the ground up? And of course part of that was music. They took pride in the idea that they could recreate music.

– Jim Stockdale, Jr., Interview with Author63


60 Ray Alcorn, e-mail message to author, August 30, 2015.

61 Gene Smith, telephone interview with author, August 28, 2015.

62 Anonymous POW, e-mail message to author, September 4, 2015.

63 James B. Stockdale, Jr., telephone interview with author, September 3, 2015.
Before the founding of the Hanoi University, eleven Americans suffered through two years in Alcatraz, the harshest prison camp saved for the hardest resisters. Living in tiny individual cells with no circulation, no movement, and no sound, the men developed a new way to communicate—flashing shadows under the crack of the door using the tap code. This method allowed them to share information and encouragement with their fellow members of the Alcatraz Gang. It also enabled two genius minds to analyze and calculate the basis of Western music theory.

James Stockdale and Bob Shumaker were both engineers, graduates of the United States Naval Academy, and musicians. Shumaker retired at the rank of Rear Admiral with a master’s degree in aeronautical engineering and a PhD in electrical engineering. He was almost selected as an Apollo astronaut and has an incredible list of accomplishments, yet he introduced himself as “Bob Shumaker, who spent eight years just waiting to hear some good country western music.” Vice Admiral Stockdale won the Medal of Honor, was the candidate for Vice President under Ross Perot, and published multiple books on philosophy, warfare, and ethics, but he included several pages on the importance of piano in his life. He remembered winning a competition, after which the head of the music department told him that “on the piano keyboard could be found the complete range of satisfactions, achievements, and emotional lifts that any profession offered.”

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65 Bob Shumaker, e-mail message to author, August 27, 2015.

Music continued to play a large part in these men’s lives during their tenure in Hanoi’s prisons. Early in his imprisonment, Shumaker studied the scale by constructing a wire across his cell that would sound a note when plucked and marking each note on the wire. When they found themselves in Alcatraz, where they could not hear or perform music, they used their scientific and mathematical training to dissect music, trying to understand why it affected them as it did. Using their fingers to signal under a door and across a 35-foot courtyard, they pondered “why you can’t have both seven sharps and seven flats, and how scales that sound good to us have unsymmetrical frequency distributions.” They asked, “Is what sounds good a cultural accommodation without regard to mathematical symmetry? Is that why oriental music sounds funny?” They determined “that there had to be a particular proportionality constantly relating the frequencies of adjacent keys all across the piano keyboard.”

The engineers set out to find “the frequency relationship of one note to its adjoining neighbor.” They created a slide rule by putting two benches together and cutting notches in them. Using the slide rule and writing calculations in the dust with their fingers, they started with A440 and worked out until they reached an answer in three weeks. They concluded that the difference in wavelength from one note to another was the twelfth root of two which, Shumaker noted, “one can easily calculate on a hand held

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67 Bob Shumaker, e-mail message to author, September 23, 2014.


69 Ibid.

70 Shumaker, e-mail.

71 Stockdale, Jr., interview.
computer as 1.0594630943593. So, if you take the frequency of any note of your choosing, multiply by this strange number."\(^{72}\) Stockdale confirmed the answer with a music teacher after repatriation and found that this number is called Helmholtz’s Constant.\(^{73}\)

Shumaker and Stockdale did not stop at one revelation. Rather, they tried to reconstruct music theory from their cells. Shumaker explained, “We also decided that Beethoven was wrong in choosing sharps and flats.” (Their knowledge of music history was obviously lacking, as the accidentals were normalized centuries before Beethoven.)

“Instead, we simply numbered the notes as 1 to 13 (placing 1 on any note of your choosing). . . with 13 being twice the frequency of 1 (i.e. one octave). Then if one plays 1-5-8-13 you have a major chord; 1-4-8-13 is a minor chord; 1-5-9-13 is an augmented chord; 1-5-7-13 is a diminished chord, etc.”\(^{74}\) Shumaker did not mention how this configuration would work with key changes.

Another couple of prisoners educated each other in music theory by piecing together their individual knowledge. Mike Christian played the guitar so he understood chords, but he had no basic theory training. Don Spoon played the trombone and knew some theory, but he had no experience playing or thinking in chords. Through a “mutual exchange of knowledge,” Spoon helped Christian understand how keys work while discovering new things himself. Christian put together a “chord wheel” based on the following concept:

\(^{72}\) Shumaker, e-mail.

\(^{73}\) Stockdale, A Vietnam Experience, 133.

\(^{74}\) Shumaker, e-mail.
If you take the notes of a scale (sharps, flats, et.al.) and arranged them linearly (like on a piano) then joined them “end-to-end” you had a wheel. If you mapped out the 3 notes of a chord on this “wheel” like 3 spokes from the center of “wheel” then Mike discovered that the relative positions of the “spoke” remained constant as you moved around the wheel. He used this to figure out the chords in different keys.  

This invention may seem simplistic, but it was effective for the time and place. Spoon later used the knowledge he gained from that wheel to help his child play guitar.

Music theory began to reach the masses with the onset of the education program. Many POWs offered classes on music theory but Bill Butler’s Music Fundamentals class in Room 3 was consistently cited as a favorite. In fact, his teaching methods were so unique that a musical production was written about him and performed at Theatre IV in Richmond, Virginia in 1991 (see fig. 10.1). Butler was “a musical whiz and a great teacher” who anticipated a need for singers over the next few years. What began as simple training for his choir became the most-attended and most-loved class in the Hanoi University. Butler started by scratching a musical staff on the floor with a brick and having the class sing whichever note he designated. He could easily sing a note and have the class sing it back to him, but when he wanted to teach chord theory without any instruments, he had to get creative.

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75 Donald Spoon, e-mail message to author, September 6, 2015.

76 Ibid.


79 Paul Galanti, e-mail message to author, August 26, 2015.

80 Ellis, Leading with Honor, 167.
Butler drew a giant keyboard on the “fifty-man concrete bed” in the center of the 70 by 30 ft room,\textsuperscript{81} known as the “human piano” or, being in a communist country, the “People’s Organ.”\textsuperscript{82} He then arranged four members of his choir on the keys, with Gene Smith on C, Jim Ray on E, Ray Alcorn on G and Ron Mastin on C to create the C major chord.\textsuperscript{83} He taught each singer his note and then, “using his choir like an instrument, he moved them to various keys and had them hum their note to demonstrate the major and

\textsuperscript{81} Mo Baker, e-mail.


\textsuperscript{83} Ibid.
minor chords, as well as augmented and diminished variations.” He directed the men to change pitch using the thumb and pinky of each hand.

As they progressed, Butler used all twelve choir members, giving each of them a key and humming their notes in their ears. The human piano “played simple tunes by hopping on and off the keys,” mainly barbershop quartets in four-part harmony, including “Lida Rose,” “Heart of My heart,” “Sweet Sixteen,” and “Silvery Moon.” Paul Galanti wrote, “It was a little crude but it worked and it was fun for both the Peoples’ Organ and us students.” Larry Chesley noted, “This novel method of instruction was not only extremely interesting but very amusing.” Lee Ellis recalled, “This highly creative class aroused considerable interest in music,” culminating in the production of South Pacific a few months later.

Music Appreciation

One day we were playing “20 Questions” with the guys in an adjacent room. Being rather full of myself I proposed a question on the composer of a Classical Music piece. I didn’t know we were tapping to Don Heiliger and was quite surprised with the immediate answer. I was also quite dismayed with the musical question he tapped back that was FAR above our group’s musical knowledge. Instant respect for Don!!

– Don Spoon, E-mail Message to Author

84 Ellis, Leading with Honor, 167.
85 Baker, e-mail.
86 Larry Chesley, Seven Years in Hanoi: A POW Tells His Story (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, Inc., 1973), 76.
87 Baker, e-mail.
89 Chesley, Seven Years in Hanoi.
90 Ellis, Leading with Honor, 167.
91 Stockdale, Jr., interview.
I was amazed by the excitement the POWs found in their Music Appreciation courses. They enthusiastically attended the same course for several semesters in a row. From how the POWs talked about their classes, they were perhaps the most exhilarating courses of this nature, thanks to their gifted professors. Seventy-six percent of the prisoners interviewed participated in a Music Appreciation course while in Hanoi.

Two teachers were consistently named by their fellow POWs: Joe Crecca and Don Heiliger. Crecca is credited with teaching the POWs’ names to Doug Hegdahl, who was released early. He “had developed a method of creating the most organized memory bank” and he “painstakingly taught Doug not only 256 names, but also, the method of memorizing, cross-referencing and retrieving those names.”\(^{92}\) Crecca’s extraordinary data retention enabled him to teach “mathematics, physics, classical music, and automobile theory and mechanics” to his fellow cellmates in Vietnam.\(^{93}\)

Joe Crecca was not a musician unless you count the four years of forced piano lessons during his early childhood. His love of music came from “listening to classical and opera music on the tiny, AM Emerson radio atop the Westinghouse fridge every Sunday while we ate an Italian spaghetti dinner.”\(^{94}\) The seed had been planted by his mother and was reawakened by his cousin Louie during his teens. Louie asked him to record Beethoven’s *Third Symphony (Eroica)* for him one weekend. Crecca only had three seven-inch tapes, so he had to record over his top 40 songs. He recalled, “With only


\(^{93}\) Wyatt, *We Came Home*, 65.  

\(^{94}\) Joe Crecca, e-mail message to author, September 19, 2015.
a few hours of tapes I eventually listened to it myself. Then I did it again. I liked it. In very short order I had recorded Beethoven’s Symphonies #5 & 7 right over the top of the top 40 and never looked back.”

Once he discovered the music, he delved into the lives of the composers and learned the stories behind his favorite pieces.

When Crecca landed in a Vietnamese prison, he “spent many hours in solitary trying to remember each of Beethoven’s symphonies, piano concertos, his violin concerto, and the symphonies and concertos of many others.” Occasionally on Sundays, the camp radio would pick up a BBC Far Eastern classical music broadcast. Crecca would be thrilled because listening to the *Eroica* and other favorites were “transportation out of the prison world. It was a temporary emotional escape.” When another POW snapped, “You feel like you’re better than us because you like that classical stuff and we don’t,” Crecca replied, “Not at all. I wish you appreciated it as I do and could feel the emotions I do and could enjoy it as I do.”

His mission was clear. As his love for classical music had helped him to survive the POW experience, he could help others find the same love and help.

Crecca’s appreciation for music was contagious, and his passion was undeniable. He taught a night class with up to eight students, teaching six new themes every day and

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95 Ibid.


97 Crecca, e-mail.


99 Ibid.

100 Ibid.
quizzing them on those melodies the next day. Geoffrey Norman recounts, “With all his considerable enthusiasm, he would hum or whistle the opening bars of some immortal symphony and then launch into a passionate account of the life of the man who had composed it. One night he was discussing the life of Mozart. By the time he had reached the composer’s poverty, early death, and burial in a pauper’s grave, he was in tears.”\textsuperscript{101} (Knowledge of Mozart’s life was more limited at that time.) Charlie Plumb remembered Crecca’s “excellent course on classical music in which he’d hum or whistle various instruments of the orchestra for about every composer I’d ever heard of. I have lots of fond memories of this.”\textsuperscript{102}

Crecca accomplished his goal with his course that lasted through many moves until the war was almost over. He proudly asserts that his class “helped those who took advantage of [his] knowledge and memory of all those melodies to enrich their lives. There are POWs that had no interest in classical music before they were shot down that now have classical music collections.”\textsuperscript{103} Teaching his favorite pieces to his cellmates indelibly intertwined the music with memories of his students. One of his pupils had trouble remembering a couple pieces, so he put lyrics to them; e.g., for Glinka’s Overture to \textit{Russlan and Ludmilla}, he sang, “Here’s a little tune about a Russian and Lud-a-milla.” Every time Crecca hears those pieces, he said, “I remember with sweet melancholy the POW who put those last two to words.”\textsuperscript{104} In Joe Crecca’s case, teaching music was just as beneficial to him as to his students.

\textsuperscript{101} Norman, \textit{Bouncing Back}, 201.

\textsuperscript{102} Charles Plumb, e-mail message to author, February 25, 2016.

\textsuperscript{103} Crecca, e-mail.

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
The other highly-praised Music Appreciation teacher, Don Heiliger, “had more passion for Classical music than Arthur Fiedler and the entire Boston Symphony combined,” according to Fred Purrington, who took the entire course several times.\footnote{Purrington, e-mail message to author, August 29, 2015.} Jim Sehorn added, “Wow!!! You want to talk about Mission Impossible, teach a bunch of fighter pilots to appreciate classical music. It was a valiant effort and greatly appreciated.”\footnote{Sehorn, e-mail message to author, September 12, 2015.} Jay Hess remembered Don Heiliger’s music class as something that he “really looked forward to.”\footnote{Hess, e-mail message to author, September 11, 2015.}

With ten to fifteen students attending at a time, the men sat in a circle to “disguise the fact that [they] were having a ‘Forbidden Class’” and “conceal Don’s identity as the leader.”\footnote{Sehorn, e-mail.} Teaching entirely from memory, Heiliger “told details of the composer’s life, hummed the notes, tapped the rhythm, and explained the structure of the music.”\footnote{Hess, e-mail.} This segment took twenty hours, and a second segment on conductors and orchestras took an additional twenty hours.\footnote{Heiliger, interview, 80.}

Heiliger’s class was so popular that Ken Cordier took detailed notes and rewrote them several times. Heiliger recalled, “He’d pass them from room to room. People were really interested in it up there. It was something new to them.”\footnote{Ibid.} Even though the guards
continued to take every copy they found, two POWs managed to leave Hanoi with their Music Appreciation notes, one copy of which is on the back of a cigarette wrapper (see fig. 10.2 and 10.3).

Figure 10.2. Cigarette Wrapper with Music Appreciation Notes on Back, from Hanoi Hilton. Source: Pensacola Naval Air Museum.
This copy of the notes is more like a study guide, with composers and their works listed, but the notes taken by Cordier are almost word-for-word transcriptions of the lectures. These notes clearly show that Don Heiliger could have written an entire textbook from memory. The amount of detail he knew about composers, symphonies, music styles, and orchestras is incredible. He gave definitions that sound like they come from a dictionary. After reviewing his notes at home, Heiliger noted, “It’s amazingly accurate. I’ve got some errors in there.”\textsuperscript{112}

Based on the class notes, Heiliger started his course with an explanation of genres and forms, giving a definition for each; e.g., “Sonata Form—Not a piece of music, but a

\textsuperscript{112} Donald Heiliger, Music Appreciation Class Notes, in possession of the author.
format for movements in most Classical period music. Each mvmnt. is developed as follows: (1) First theme, (2) Second theme, (3) Development of both themes, (4) Exposition or Recapitulation. This is the final statement of fully developed theme."

Then he discussed the different musical periods; e.g.,

Classical—1725 to early 1800s. Characterized by precision & exactness in music. Little interpretation left to performer. Symphony developed here, whose mvmnts. rigidly follow sonata form (Concertos & sonatas also follow sonata form). During period, progression of tempos in a 4-movement work was: fast, slow, fast, faster; in a 3-mvmnt. work: fast, slow, fast. Tempos did not vary within a mvmnt. Instruments in today’s form by end of period. Piano evolved from harpsichord to clavichord at beginning of this period.

Next, starting with the Baroque Era, Heiliger introduced the most important composers of each period, providing details about their lives, works, and styles. In addition to naming an astounding number of works from each composer, he knew such intricate information as the breakdown of Mozart’s concertos (27 for piano, 5 for violin, 4 for French horn, 1 for clarinet, etc.). For each piece that he named, he would hum or whistle the theme and often recommend the best recording of it along with the label and price. His class notes include a page of handwritten themes (see fig. 10.4).

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113 Ibid.
114 Ibid.
Figure 10.4. Handwritten Tone Sketches from Don Heiliger’s Music Appreciation Class Notes. Source: Donald Heiliger.

For his course on the orchestra, Heiliger discussed all the best orchestras in the world, telling their specialties, their conductors, their labels, and more. He also listed the
top performers for each instrument. Of course, by the time he taught his class, some of his information was likely out of date, since he had been in prison and unable to receive updates for many years. He completed his class with a description of the orchestra’s schematics, as seen in Figure 10.5.

![Figure 10.5. Orchestra Schematics from Don Heiliger’s Music Appreciation Class Notes. Source. Donald Heiliger.](image)

Finally, one more POW deserves a mention in this chapter for using music as a teaching aid. Konrad Trautman had a German background, so he taught a conversational German class. According to Jim Sehorn, “Much of Konnie’s class material was sourced from old German songs such as ‘Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht,’ ‘Oh Tannenbaum,’ ‘Du, du liegst mir im Herzen,’ ‘Du kannst nicht true sein,’ [sic] and as you might have guessed, ‘Hofbräuhaus.’” 115 Sehorn quipped, “Somehow I always felt that this may not have been the safest way to learn proper conjugation of German verbs but it was a great way to pass the hours.” 116 Michael Brazelton added, “Konrad also taught us a lot of Air Force songs: The Air Force Song and several more bawdy songs.” 117 Jay Hess noted, “It was fun to

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115 Sehorn, e-mail.

116 Ibid.

117 Michael Brazelton, e-mail message to author, August 27, 2015.
learn these songs from him.” Trautman may not have focused on conjugation, but his students could still remember how to sing in German half a century later.

The importance of music education in a prisoner-of-war camp may not be readily obvious. Most of these men would never use the information they learned. The majority of Hanoi University students would not receive college credit for their work, and many admitted that very little of their studies remained in their memories after their release. Jim Sehorn speculated, “I think the classes served as much to provide a distraction from the reality of our situation as they did an educational discipline.” Eugene McDaniel explained, “We faced up to our long empty hours together, and our ingenuity led to an amazing program of teaching that was to give every man hope in those hours and that was to develop later on into ‘Hanoi University.’”

Hope was the driving force behind the education program, and hope was essential for survival. The POWs needed to see a light at the end of the tunnel. Preparing themselves for release helped them to believe there would be a release, which gave them a reason to fight another day. In addition to relieving boredom, the education program helped them improve themselves at a time when the prisoners needed a boost of confidence. Whether they were learning to dance for a wife that they prayed would be

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118 Hess, e-mail.

119 Sehorn, e-mail.

120 McDaniel, Before Honor, 101.

there when they returned, or they were learning a new language so they could travel someday, or they were learning to sing so they could free themselves from emotional baggage, they were becoming better men.

Teaching each other forged stronger bonds and developed interpersonal communication skills. Learning from each other fostered empathy. Robbie Risner summed up the importance of education in the POWs’ experience:

> I never lost hope, and never did I despair of coming back alive. I believe, as do all of the other men who were imprisoned in North Vietnam, that we came back stronger, better men. I think we consider ourselves better in that we are now more perceptive. We have a greater degree of compassion and understanding, and hopefully, we are kinder and more thoughtful in our daily encounters with our fellowmen.\textsuperscript{122}

Mo Baker said, “I took music with me into to the dungeons of Hanoi to cheer me through some very dark times.”\textsuperscript{123} When the American prisoners in Vietnam felt hopeless, they found their hope through music.

\textsuperscript{122} Wyatt, \textit{We Came Home}, 448.

\textsuperscript{123} Baker, e-mail.
PART III

TORTURE
Chapter Eleven

The Torture Experience

There is nothing about Vietnam that reminds you of home. A Wagnerian Opera, or Hell, perhaps, but not home.

– Joe L. Jordan, *Liberty Lobby*¹

Staying alive was a daily struggle for the prisoners of the North Vietnamese. Norris Overly called the experience “something we haven’t seen before, worse than the Nazi Stalag or the North Korean compound.”² Jay Hess recalled, “In the night, there were grown men crying. And there were screams. It was a kind of a horror place.”³ Bill Robinson remembered his time in Vietnam as “weeks, months, and years of boredom punctuated by moments, hours and days of stark terror.”⁴

The general conditions for the POWs were discussed in Chapter 2, but this focus on torture requires me to delve deeper. However, removing explicit torture from the equation, life in the Hanoi Hilton would still seem torturous. Mike McGrath attempted to re-create his experience through a book of sketches, but he found he was unable to portray the actual *hardness* of the conditions we lived under – the dimly lit rooms and claustrophobia-inducing cells; the lack of adequate food which, combined with filth, caused disease and indescribable discomfort. It is difficult to sketch a vitamin and protein deficiency that results in beri-beri; and no picture can convey the impact of constant plagues of lice, heat rash, biting bed bugs, mosquitoes, cockroaches, and rats. Add to this the hostility and brutality of the


guards, who had been taught from childhood to hate Americans, and the sum total is an unbelievable existence for hundreds of American fighting men who somehow survived the ordeal.\textsuperscript{5}

Insufficient nutrition and medical care led to the deaths of many POWs. Harold Kushner claimed that “the typical POW in his camp lost 40 to 50 per cent of his normal weight, shook and burned with malaria much of the time, defecated 30 to 100 times a day because of acute and chronic dysentery, bled at the gums from scurvy and suffered intense pain from a swollen liver, spleen and scrotum associated with acute malnutrition.”\textsuperscript{6} As a doctor, Kushner could have saved many of his fellow prisoners if he had the medicine and equipment, but instead he had to watch as ten of his friends died in his arms, bringing him to the brink of insanity.\textsuperscript{7} He saw men who cracked under the pressure “lie on their beds in fetal positions, sucking their thumbs, calling for mama.”\textsuperscript{8} Two of his friends “just lay down in bed and within a matter of weeks they were dead.”\textsuperscript{9}

In addition to malnutrition and disease, many POWs suffered from injuries obtained during their shootdown, bailout, and subsequent torture. When Joe Kittinger asked for treatment for an infected wound, the guard callously reminded him that “criminals” did not have that privilege.\textsuperscript{10} Mo Baker received a similar response from the guard nicknamed Bug, who demanded information in exchange for medical care:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{5} John M. McGrath, \textit{Prisoner of War: Six Years in Hanoi} (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1975), ix.
\item \textsuperscript{6} “POW’s Plead for Death,” Associated Press, April 1973.
\item \textsuperscript{7} Bobby D. Wagnon, “Communication: The Key Element to Prisoner of War Survival,” \textit{Air University Review} 27 (May-June 1976), 9.
\item \textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 2.
\item \textsuperscript{9} “POW’s Plead for Death,” Associated Press.
\end{itemize}
Your answers are not satisfying! You do not cooperate. You only want to talk about your injury. You cannot blame us for that. You did it to yourself. I hope it rots. Then we throw you away with it. We do not fix. You do not deserve the humane and lenient treatment from the Vietnamese people. I go now to ask the high authorities to have you shot.\textsuperscript{11}

John McCain broke both arms and a leg when he ejected from his plane and sustained more injuries during his capture. Still, he was taken directly to prison for interrogation. He was repeatedly knocked unconscious by the guards for four days, until he agreed to answer their questions once they took him to a hospital. The doctor took his pulse and said, “It’s too late,” and then left McCain to die. Only after they discovered that his father was powerful in the military did the Camp Authority take him to the hospital. McCain emphasized, “There were hardly any amputees among the prisoners who came back because the North Vietnamese would not give medical treatment to someone badly injured. The transition to the dirt, filth and infection made it difficult for a guy to survive. In fact, the treatment in the hospital almost killed me.”\textsuperscript{12}

The prisoners who eventually received treatment realized it was so primitive that they did not even want it. Daniel Hefel clearly remembered his prison appendectomy, which took the “butchers” four hours because they could not hold the wide-awake man still.\textsuperscript{13} Cecil Brunson quipped, “We called our doctor ‘The Mechanic’ because that’s about all he was.”\textsuperscript{14} The clever Americans sometimes found ways to treat their own

\textsuperscript{11} Deanna Coronado, “War Hero Shares Reflections of the Past, Weighs in on Election,” \textit{Daily Dunklin Democrat} (Kennett, MO), October 30, 2008.


\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 245.

wounds. On his trek from South Vietnam, Michael Benge would “lay in river beds so fish could feed off his dead tissue.” Kittinger found that urinating into his wound “to wash out some of the dirt and pus” kept the infection from spreading. Of course, maintaining their health was near impossible considering the sanitation conditions in their cells. Howard Rutledge spent three weeks in irons while suffering from dysentery. He wrote,

> There was a bucket in the room in which to perform the bodily functions, but it is difficult when you’re handcuffed with your arms behind your back and your legs in irons, and you’re too weak to move. So I and the prisoners before me just relieved ourselves in our clothing and on the floor. No one ever cleaned the Outhouse. To keep us lying in that filth was part of the plan.

Mo Baker summed up the living conditions in one sentence:

> It was WAR on a daily basis in the Hanoi Hilton: War to survive the physical and medical hazards, war to resist the enemies constant efforts to propagandize the captives to benefit their worldwide image, and war to cope with the tragedy of separation from the families who agonized for us each instant of our confinement.

**Landing in Hostile Territory**

I was severely beaten and mistreated by these “lovely” and “gentle” people, receiving serious injuries and almost losing life.

> – Bobby Bagley, *We Came Home*

The physical torture began immediately upon capture for most prisoners of war. Despite their training in evasion, the men could not hide their presence after their planes

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18 Coronado, “War Hero Shares Reflections of the Past.”

19 Wyatt, *We Came Home*, 32.
exploded and they drifted down in parachutes. The countryside of Vietnam is dotted with hamlets and the villagers and local militiamen quickly surrounded the downed pilots. The first to arrive often shot at the Americans. Cecil Brunson recalled a man unloading his pistol at him from fifteen feet away as the bullets whizzed past his head.20 Attacking with machetes, bamboo poles, rocks, and fists, the civilians brutally beat the prisoners.21 Many of the men still considered missing in action may have never escaped the first village.

The peasants forcefully stripped the pilots, often injuring them in the process (see fig. 11.1).22 Ted Guy proclaimed, “The villagers had blood lust on their mind.”23 Mike McGrath recalled, “I said my final prayers that night, because I was sure I would not reach Hanoi alive.”24 The prisoners were paraded through the nearby villages, giving everyone a chance to see, kick, spit on, or stone them.25 Experiences differed after the initial capture, depending on the location of the incident. Richard Bates was hogtied and left in a coffin-sized tunnel for 35 days.26 Thomas Moe marched one hundred miles at gunpoint.27 Ted Guy was tied to a tree in front a firing squad which was called off when


21 Ibid.; Wyatt, We Came Home, 168.

22 McGrath, Prisoner of War, 1.


24 McGrath, Prisoner of War, 4.

25 Wyatt, We Came Home, 45.

26 Ibid.

an officer noticed the high rank (Colonel) on his flight suit. Others were taken straight to the Hanoi Hilton for their first interrogation.

Figure 11.1. Vietnamese Villagers Attack American Pilot. Source: John M. McGrath, Prisoner of War: Six Years in Hanoi (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1975), 2.

The introduction to prison life started in New Guy Village, a squalid dungeon which kept the new arrivals isolated and confused. Although his opinion of Vietnam’s motives cannot be verified, Robert Coram posits,

The idea was to take a POW who probably was injured during his ejection, who may have sustained wounds from the local militia after he was shot down, who was exhausted and confused by the arduous nighttime travel and apprehensive about his future and immediately subject him to torture. It was a sound and effective method of interrogation designed to break the spirit and force a “surrender” and then a “confession” of his crimes. Many a fighter pilot found that in the space of a half hour he was crying and screaming, pissing all over himself, and pleading for mercy.

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28 Wyatt, We Came Home, 229.


With hundreds of debriefings providing the same information, Craig Howes could safely say, “By 1967, the first interrogation was utterly formulaic.” The Camp Authority asked the four questions allowed by the Code of Conduct (name, rank, date of birth, and service number), which the prisoner would quickly answer. The American soldiers were trained to give no other information, but “through sadistic torture combined with constant harassment and sleep deprivation,” the interrogators would force him to answer a fifth question. This question was typically something they could already answer, such as the type of plane he had flown, which could be determined by the wreckage.

The answer was not important. According to Howes, “Control, not information, was thus the goal.” Bill Stark noted that the objective was “not to get information from me, but to demonstrate to me that they were able to get information from me.” The POW would invariably quote the Geneva Convention and refuse to answer the last question. This response would anger the interrogator, who would snap back, “The Geneva Convention applies to military prisoners of war, which you are not. You are a Yankee pirate. You are a criminal and will be treated as a criminal. If you do not answer my questions you will die in this cell. Do you understand?” Howes explained the dilemma the POWs faced:

Since North Vietnam chose to talk about the war as an elemental struggle between besieged Vietnamese Communists and aggressive American capitalists, a POW

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was either evil incarnate or a corrupted and exploited victim of his own government. He must therefore repent or be destroyed – and torture ensured that the choice came quickly. \(^{35}\)

Tom Moe added, “North Vietnamese policy was that POWs were war criminals, a policy that supposedly justified brutal treatment and total control.” \(^{36}\)

**Systematic Torture**

We were seeing Communism as it really was – harsh, repressive and cruel. Anyone who envisioned North Vietnam as anything other than a totalitarian dictatorship was totally confused.

– Robinson Risner, *The Passing of the Night* \(^{37}\)

Torture was not a random occurrence in North Vietnam’s prisons. It was not used merely as punishment and to extract propaganda. In fact, 95 percent of the American POWs were tortured, and more than 55 men were tortured to death. \(^{38}\) Coram declared, “No American POWs in history would be subjected to such institutionalized brutal and prolonged torture sessions as were the men in Hoa Lo.” \(^{39}\)

By June of 1965, the Camp Authority had solidified their torture policy, as confirmed to Larry Guarino by the guard nicknamed Dog:

You have criminally attacked our people, and it has been decided that you are always to be treated as a criminal. You must cooperate and show repentance for your crimes to earn good treatment. Sooner or later, you are going to show repentance. You are going to admit you are a criminal. You are going to denounce your government. You are going to beg our people for forgiveness. \(^{40}\)

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36 Moe, “Pure Torture.”

37 Robinson Risner, *The Passing of the Night: My Seven Years as a Prisoner of the North Vietnamese* (Duncanville, TX: World Wide Printing, 1999), 169.


40 Guy, “Welcome to the Hanoi Hilton.”

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This statement implies that once a prisoner begged for forgiveness, the torture would stop. Since this was not the case, a hidden agenda was more probable. Kevin McManus surmised, “The beatings were going to occur for a specified period of time almost regardless of what happened. Again, it was to establish the rules of the game. They were in control.”

Frederick Kiley noted that Vietnam followed the same socialist guidelines as China in their treatment of POWs. He wrote, “They can justify both barbarous and humane treatment of the POW. The prisoner of no value to negotiations, of no potential for political indoctrination or ‘re-education,’ and of no worth in propaganda exploitation can be slaughtered, left to starve, or abandoned to disease and infection.” Additionally, since the POW was considered a criminal, it was “his fault as a criminal for being ‘reactionary,’ ‘unrepentant,’ or ‘insincere’ (their terms) should he be mistreated.” The Camp Authority of Vietnam regularly accused their prisoners of having a “bad attitude,” thereby bringing the torture upon themselves. Barry Bridger experienced the hypocrisy of this ideology during his first interrogation. He explained, “The Vietnamese are fanatics about Communism. To them, truth is that which serves the revolution. And they regard life very cheaply.” On the first day, they said, “If we were as bad as the Koreans and the Japanese we’d torture you. The next day they tortured me.”

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43 Ibid.

44 Wyatt, We Came Home, 76.
Fear was a weapon of mind control. James DiBernardo’s first interrogator could “put the fear of God into one by just saying, ‘We won’t kill you. We’ll just make you wish you were dead.’” The POW quickly realized, “They were not after military information in these sessions, they were after my mind.” Once a prisoner had undergone torture, the horror of facing it again was debilitating. Everett Alvarez said, “The worst time was at night, when you heard their keys rattling. You knew they were coming to take someone, and you prayed it wasn’t going to be you. Then you prayed for the poor guy they took.” McGrath echoed this sentiment, “And often, just about the time you were dropping off to sleep, the jingle of keys would drive pure terror through your heart. Whose door would be opened? Who would be taken out for torture this time? What do they want now?” Ed Mechenbier agreed, “The most fearsome sound in all the world was keys…. He’s coming to get somebody.”

The sound of keys caused constant dread because torture did not have to follow a cause-and-effect scenario. A prisoner could behave perfectly and suffer the same pain as one who punched his guard in the face. They lived in a nightmare, never knowing when they would be taken. Alvarez recalled, “Though we were all thin and frail from the putrid diet, they did not let up on the physical torture and indiscriminate harassment. At random, POWs were driven up to the Pool Hall, bound with ropes and violently abused.”

45 Wyatt, We Came Home, 155.


47 McGrath, Prisoner of War, 90.

48 “Return with Honor,” Online Forum, PBS Online.

Whether the next victim was chosen by random or methodically, the anxiety was overwhelming. Ralph Gaither could never forget the purge that started with the first hut at the bottom of the hill. He wrote, “We listened, my buddies and I, to the harsh, loud voices of the Vietnamese torturers and the anguished cries of our fellow Americans. Inevitability marched hut by hut up that hill.”

When George McKnight returned from several days of heavy torture, he announced that the Vietnamese had started a purge in which “every prisoner was to be bent.” SRO Stockdale tapped back, “It looks like we’re going to take it on the chin, one by one. So let’s go in and take it on the chin.”

The Extortion Era

There are nevertheless indications that U.S. prisoners of war in North Viet-Nam are being subjected to physical or mental coercion, and that one objective of this treatment is to extract from them propaganda statements critical of U.S. actions in Viet-Nam. There have been reports and films of U.S. prisoners in apparently dazed conditions on exhibit in Hanoi, and North Viet-Nam has released some 27 propaganda statements attributed to U.S. prisoners of war.

– U.S. Department of State, “Prisoners of War”

Although the main objective of Vietnam’s torture program appeared to be control, the Camp Authority also employed persecution to further their cause. During the Extortion Era of 1965-69, prisoners were constantly harassed for anti-war statements and apologies. The interrogators typically started with something like this:

You are blackest air pirate. You commit crimes of aggression against the peace-loving people of Vietnam. You have been duped by the capitalistic warmongers of Wall Street. You have obstinate and bad attitude. Now, the camp commander


allow you to write war crime confession and condemn the imperialistic warmonger United States. If you do not cooperate, you will be seriously punished.53

The POWs refused to comply, kicking off a round of torture that would last until they gave in and confessed or until they were so close to death that nothing could be extracted from them. Again, many of them did not survive the torture sessions, which could last for weeks. Thomas Moe commented,

Although they had murdered prisoners, I believe most of my colleagues who died were accidentally tortured to death. The North Vietnamese knew they could not win the war militarily, but they might succeed if they garnered world sympathy. It would be difficult for them to look good if too many POWs “died in captivity.” But I came pretty close, as did many of my mates.54

One account shows that about eighty percent of the prisoners eventually submitted.55 Intelligence experts reported that no returned POWs stopped after answering the “Big Four.”56 Floyd Thompson declared, “None of us signed willingly. There was death staring us in the face – either die or sign it. It was my feeling that these propaganda statements were not worth dying over.”57 One of Vietnam’s favorite statements to force from a POW was how they were receiving humane and lenient treatment, and the guards used inhumane treatment to compel the prisoners to say it. Thompson affirmed, “There is no man who will not break under Communist interrogation. They have complete control over your environment to make life a living hell for the sake of obtaining a very simple

53 McGrath, Prisoner of War, 42.


statement to the effect that I’m well treated and these are nice folks and why don’t we go home and leave them alone.”

In addition to coercing propaganda statements, torture was utilized in the prisoners’ reeducation. A source inside North Vietnam’s government revealed the importance of the ideological indoctrination of POWs. The General Political Directorate of the Ministry of National Defense was personally involved in the attempted brainwashing of every prisoner, and he “heavily stressed” that each POW be “subjected to it from the very beginning after his arrival in NVN.” Stephen Leopold said he was put in solitary when he “flunked a Political Science exam given by the prison camp commander.” He accused Leopold of using “the logic of a double-stubborn Washington robber” and being a “pig-headed imperialist aggressor who needed to think about his crimes more carefully.”

Peter Schoeffel recalled a “very high intensity” quiz in which the interrogator vowed to “use punishment that was longer in duration and more painful than any [he] had been subjected to before” unless he adjusted his “thinking about the U.S. role in Vietnam.” After witnessing the “illogic” of communist thinking, Schoeffel believed they were capable of “trying to force a man to change his thinking by using pain.”

58 Ruhl, “Code of Conduct,” 64.


60 Wyatt, We Came Home, 321.

61 Lee Humiston et al., Voices from the Dark: A Collection of Poems Written in the Cells of Hanoi, Viet Nam and Peking, China (South Portland, ME: Maine Military Museum, 2007), 18.
Political indoctrination was critical to the plight of Vietnam because propaganda was their strongest weapon. Daily broadcasts in the prison cells repeated this objective, “We are not going to defeat you in Vietnam. We are going to defeat you in your universities and on your streets by turning public opinion against the war, so that your administration will have to withdraw their troops, and when they are withdrawn to a sufficient level, we will launch an offensive and defeat you.”

A Vietnamese Politburo resolution outlined the objectives of prisoner education, with the “primary focus on making them understand the goals and the justice of our people’s cause of resisting the Americans to save the nation.”

The prisoners of war were pawns in a game, and “the DRV made every effort to elicit world support for their cause through exploitation of the PWs.” Recorded statements of confessions, apologies, and assurances of humane and lenient treatment played over the camp radio and worldwide media. However, Ted Guy asserted, “Most spoke in strained voices and used Communist jargon — it was clear they had not written the stuff and were speaking under duress.” For many POWs, far worse than any torture was “being forced into propaganda situations.” Guy explained, “You have to remember

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we were all well-educated, career officers who had a real and intense feeling for duty and country. We tried our best to thwart our captors’ every effort.”  

The most harrowing cases of forced propaganda involved in-person meetings with the press, celebrities, and peace delegations. William Lawrence recalled, “We were not only tortured for information, but also to visit with peace delegations. If we refused, we were tortured and if one finally consented to do so, he would be tortured before hand to be certain he said the right things.”

When James Kasler refused to appear on TV, he faced his worst torture session, a full six weeks of misery. By the time the Vietnamese finished with him, Kasler was in no shape to demonstrate his “good treatment” to the press. However, his experience gave him insights into his captors’ methods:

Brainwashing has been described as torture, fear, relief, and then repeated until the individual becomes receptive to and is willing to parrot anything he is told. Isolation, starvation, and denial of sleep are used in conjunction with brainwashing to reduce individual’s resistance. The Vietnamese employed all of these techniques but they were crude and ruthless in their approach. They were impatient for results and when they were not forthcoming, they became even more ruthless.

Forcing someone to say something under duress does not indicate that you have changed their mind, and the Camp Authority learned this the hard way when they tortured Jeremiah Denton into speaking at a press conference. To prepare for his appearance, Denton received torture during the days and indoctrination all night. A stern

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66 Ibid., 98.

67 Wyatt, *We Came Home*, 316.

68 Ibid., 293.
warning before the meeting reminded him to use his head and remember the last few days.69

During the interview, a Japanese man gave a “long, ingratiating talk” which gave Denton the options of “either endorsing killing civilians and eating children for breakfast or of condemning [his] government.”70 Knowing the potential consequences involved, the American chose a third option. Summoning all his courage, Denton proclaimed, “I don’t know what is going on in the war now because the only sources I have access to are North Vietnam radio, magazines, and newspapers. “I don’t know what is happening, but whatever the position of my government is I support it – fully.”71 In addition to countering his previous propaganda tapes, he seized the opportunity to transmit messages to his government. While he spoke, Denton blinked his eyes in Morse Code, alerting the U.S. military that the POWs were undergoing T-O-R-T-U-R-E.72

The rebellious actions of Denton and many other POWs demonstrate the lack of effectiveness in Vietnam’s brainwashing techniques. Robinson Risner argued the fallacy in the Vietnamese indoctrination attempts, which might have worked on their own people, but failed to factor in the history and culture of their prisoners. He wrote, “If he wanted to believe a North Vietnamese communist over Americans, only in America is he allowed to do that, and it doesn’t present any credibility whatsoever as far as I’m


70 Ibid.


72 Ibid., 79.
concerned, to any thinking person who reads all of the presented evidence.” Risner posited, “How could a sane, thinking, rational person imagine that because we had become prisoners of war that we were going to change and now suddenly we’re condemning the war and the President and so forth?” After being tortured to make propaganda statements, he said, “We lived in abject misery knowing that we had betrayed our country and we couldn’t die. They wouldn’t let us die; they only tortured us.” Their guilt of betrayal only increased when they heard reports of the anti-war movement in America and feared their propaganda was to blame.

The government-sanctioned torture came to a sudden halt on the third of September, 1969, the day Ho Chi Minh left this world. His death terminated the system of “systematic and institutionalized torture” that had tormented the prisoners for four years. Dick Stratton recalled, “At that point, torture as a general rule stopped. And torture came from the highest levels of command. It was not something, some drunken camp commander did. Because on one day they had authority to torture and the next day they didn’t.”

The Politburo released a resolution two months later which stated, “Even though we do not view American pilots as prisoners of war and we are not bound by the terms of

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74 Ibid.


76 “Return with Honor,” Online Forum, PBS Online.
the 1949 Geneva Convention governing the treatment of prisoners of war, we should apply the points of the Geneva Convention that are consistent with our humanitarian policies.”\textsuperscript{77} Provisions for clean cells, exercise, mail, and religious services (with the purpose of educating the POWs) were part of the new policy. This was not the end of torture completely, as punishment came in many forms and for very slight infractions, but the Camp Authority was no longer authorized to torture for the purpose of mind control and demanding propaganda. James Mulligan declared, “Compared to our previous existence it was like living in a country club,”\textsuperscript{78}

When it came to discipline, Robbie Risner said, “The Vietnamese always liked to find an excuse to punish you. Whether this crime was ‘whistling,’ ‘singing,’ ‘talking,’ or refusing to go beyond the Big Four, though, once caught, the POW passed swiftly down the path of ‘torture, confession, apology, and atonement.’”\textsuperscript{79} The camp’s rules gave the Vietnamese every excuse to torture the Americans, since “the criminals must absolutely abide by and seriously obey all orders and instructions,” including those which they physically could not obey.\textsuperscript{80} The guards required all prisoners to bow to them, and those who “did not bow deeply enough” were beaten. Some guards opened the peep-holes on the cells hundreds of times a day, requiring the prisoners to bow each time, despite their state of health and precluding sleep.\textsuperscript{81} Mike McGrath was beaten for showing “disrespect

\textsuperscript{77} “North Vietnam Politburo Resolution No. 194-NQ/TW.”

\textsuperscript{78} James A. Mulligan, \textit{The Hanoi Commitment} (Virginia Beach, VA: RIF Marketing, 1981), 245.

\textsuperscript{79} Howes, \textit{Voices of the Vietnam POWs}, 61.

\textsuperscript{80} McGrath, \textit{Prisoner of War}, 112.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 28.
by bowing crookedly.” Dick Stratton explained his understanding of the rules, To lead is to be tortured. To communicate with a fellow prisoner was a de facto sign of leadership resulting in torture. To fail to bow is to be beaten & tortured. To fail to do exactly what you were told and when you were told was to be tortured.” According to Bud Day, at least half of the torture in the POW camps was for communicating.

Unfortunately, information on Vietnam’s exact policies of punishment are not available to anyone outside its government. In fact, the Camp Authority still denies it ever tortured their American captives. The word “torture” was used only in denial of its existence and tended to “inflame” the guards. The V preferred the phrase “resolute and severe punishment” instead, implying that the treatment was deserved.

Methods of Inflicting Pain

Torture is methodically applied pain to produce a wearing effect— to make you submit. Usually the pain would reach a level just short of stopping vital functions, although it could continue even after one lost consciousness.

– Thomas Moe, “Pure Torture”

The North Vietnamese had turned torture into an artform, carefully calculated to produce the most pain while leaving the least evidence. One POW called it “the most barbaric, senseless, and inhumane treatment that man can inflict upon man and still keep

82 Ibid., 46.
85 Howes, Voices of the Vietnam POWs, 61.
86 Ibid.
that mistreated human alive.” Another explained, “The torture was both excruciating and diabolical, as it minimized obvious scars that could have been seen by outsiders.”

Years of experience allowed the guards to reach a new level of malevolence in their techniques:

Pain is the body’s natural defense. When something hurts, we usually quit doing it. However, when the pain is not under our control and reaches a certain level of duration or intensity, there is a circuit breaker in our brains that short-circuits the pain, at least for a while. This circuit breaker was tripped often for prisoners of war under interrogation and torture in North Vietnamese prisons. When that point of extreme pain was reached, the prisoners either passed out or went into a zone where the pain no longer mattered. The interrogators came to understand this phenomenon and found ways to work around it. By putting their victims in uncomfortable positions for days and even weeks, they inflicted pain that became more and more excruciating, but never tripped the breaker.

Torture generally fell into four categories: physical violence, sleep deprivation and malnutrition, solitary confinement, and denial of medical treatment. Combining these tactics provided the harshest results.

The techniques that most people heard about were far from the worst Vietnam had to offer. Cigarette burns, bamboo slivers in the fingers, and the removal of fingernails

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barely made the prisoners flinch. Thomas Moe learned about waterboarding long before it was used in Guantánamo Bay:

The guards stuffed a rag in my mouth with the rod, then, after putting another rag over my face, they slowly poured the water on it until all I was breathing was water vapor. I could feel my lungs going tight with fluid and felt like I was drowning. I thrashed in panic as darkness took over. As I passed out, thinking I was dying, I remember thanking God that we had made a stand against this kind of society.

This method was hardly mentioned because it was so mild compared to the other torture in Hanoi. Dick Durbin mocked the activists who compared CIA black sites in the early 2000s to the POW camps in Vietnam. “This is a far cry from the worst treatment at Gitmo,” he wrote, “which seems to consist of dripping water, variable air conditioning, and loud pop music. Of 704 American POWs, 113 died in captivity. No prisoners have died at Gitmo.”

“Barbaric treatment” was common; e.g., Ernest Brace was “buried in the ground up to his neck” for a week, causing him to lose the use of his legs. Dieter Dengler was dragged by water buffaloes and hung by his ankles over an ant nest so he was bitten on his face until he lost consciousness. Robbie Risner spent ten months in a pitch-black

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92 Moe, “Pure Torture,” 93.

93 Different River, “Dick Durbin, Guantánamo, and Vietnam.”


96 Brennan, “Tortured with Razor-sharp Bamboo.”
room with nothing but rats, dysentery, and vertigo.⁹⁷ Other prisoners were handcuffed for months in the bomb shelter under their beds where the mosquitoes would lead to insanity.⁹⁸ Ruptured ear drums were also common, because the guards would slap the prisoners’ ears with their palm cupped.⁹⁹

Many of the torturers’ techniques sounded harmless, but over time, the pain became unbearable. It’s hard to imagine how sitting on a stool could be considered torture, unless you are forced to sit on that stool for ten days without moving in the slightest. One twitch of a muscle and “they’d pummel you with their fists and gun butts until they tired.” Thomas Moe reported, “I don’t remember sleeping during these periods — just pain and the interminable passage of time.”¹⁰⁰ Richard Dutton recalled, “The guards would take turns knocking me off with blows to the head. The object was to see how far they could knock me. I think the record was ten feet!”¹⁰¹

Standing and kneeling were also requisitioned as torture methods. George Coker called his two months on the wall his “worst experience in Vietnam.” From 5:30 AM to 10 PM, Coker was forced to stand facing the wall with his hands above his head. After two weeks of this, “his knee began oozing black.”¹⁰² Gerald Coffee received a similar punishment, except that he had to kneel with his hands over his head. He called this one

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⁹⁷ Townley, Defiant, 64.

⁹⁸ McGrath, Prisoner of War, 66.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 80.

¹⁰⁰ Moe, “Pure Torture,” 90.

¹⁰¹ Wyatt, We Came Home, 169.

of Vietnam’s “favorite ‘nonviolent’ mini-tortures.\textsuperscript{103} Mike McGrath remembered that his knees became “flattened, red and swollen” after a few hours.\textsuperscript{104} To speed up the process of breaking a prisoner, the guards would place a small rock under each knee.\textsuperscript{105} While this may seem like a merely unpleasant position, Myron Donald warned naysayers, “There’s no way that one person can ever possibly tell another what it’s like – the simple thing of standing on your knees for ten or twelve hours. You just start pouring sweat, and your muscles start to tremble, and there’s no way you can ever tell another person who hasn’t done it what it’s like.”\textsuperscript{106}

Another common punishment was the use of metal restraints. Howard Rutledge recalled, “Little child-size handcuffs (see fig. 11.2) would force the elbows together painfully, and we would be left in them for weeks at a time; or we were shackled in leg irons, handcuffed behind our backs, and left on our beds in this position day and night.”\textsuperscript{107} McGrath bemoaned the dreaded manacles, “made of two flat bands of steel, with the ‘W’ shapes hinged at one end and locked at the other.” He added, “The wrist openings were small, so the flat bands would cut into your wrists, if you relaxed long enough to let your elbows separate…. If the manacles were applied with your wrists behind your back, you were in for a lot of pain and discomfort.” Eating, sleeping, and

\textsuperscript{103} Gerald Coffee, \textit{Beyond Survival: Building on the Hard Times - A POW’s Inspiring Story} (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1990), 212.

\textsuperscript{104} McGrath, \textit{Prisoner of War}, 44.

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{107} Rutledge, \textit{In the Presence of Mine Enemies}, 51-52.
bodily functions were incredibly difficult in the manacles, which could be worn for weeks.\textsuperscript{108}


These restraints put the POWs in what is now called a “stress position,” another method used by the CIA at Gitmo. George Coker argued the definition of torture when the news media protested the actions of American soldiers at Iraq’s Abu Ghraib prison in 2004. While he agreed that waterboarding is torture, he believed the tactics employed there do not count:

If they had threatened me that I was going to have to have women take pictures of me in my skivvies, I’d have said, “Go at it, pal…. That’s OK by me.” I’m not trying to defend it, but you’ve got to realize there’s a humongous difference between that and somebody who’s really being brutalized. We had an understanding amongst ourselves of what hard-core torture really was.\textsuperscript{109}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[108] McGrath, \textit{Prisoner of War}, 68.
\item[109] Kimberlin, “Our POWs.”
\end{footnotes}
According to Coker, the POWs in Vietnam granted that a few days in stocks could only be called “mistreatment.” Once you were in that position for a week, it became torture.\(^{110}\)

No one disputed the torture classification of the rubber hose beatings. The guards whipped naked prisoners with what appeared to be fan belts or strips of tires. One POW barely survived his punishment of one hundred strokes every day for nine days, and another was “tortured to complete insanity,” leading to his death.\(^{111}\) Bud Day recounted his harrowing experience with this agonizing method: “Cutting, knife-like pain ripped through the swollen meat, down through the legs, up through the spine to the brain. Involuntary animal-like noises boiled out of my throat. Blood trickles and fright argued with reason and resolve.” As he refused to answer his interrogator’s questions, his “brain shouted in alarm, ‘You nutty bastard, this stupid gook is going to kill you! Tell him something. Anything...something.’”\(^{112}\)

Ted Guy went through a brutal torture session in 1972 (after torture was supposedly outlawed) that combined several of the most popular methods. After going through the ropes, he knelt until his knees were the size of basketballs. Then he was beaten with a rubber hose until he had a double hernia and looked like raw meat. The sight of Guy made his guard vomit and cry.\(^{113}\)

As painful as it was to have their skin ripped from their bodies, the POWs still preferred the rubber hoses to the ropes (see fig. 11.3). Kevin McManus explained,
“Beatings are easy…. For that point where your body can’t take it anymore, it just shuts down and you go unconscious…. But the ropes were—they were scary because they you know, you’d been put in a position whereby if you did something, you’d choke yourself.”


The original rope trick was simply tying the prisoner’s arms behind his back and pulling them up until the shoulders dislocated. As the torturers gained experience, they learned new techniques. Rutledge recalled, “This time they laced the rope from my ankles up around my neck through my handcuffed wrists. This forced me into a pretzel-like position; if I bent forward or leaned backward, the rope would choke me.” While he

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114 “Return with Honor,” Online Forum, PBS Online.
struggled to stay still, “one guard repeatedly struck [his] head and shoulders with a bamboo pole; another jumped up and down on the rope binding [his] legs, cutting deep into [his] ankles.”

Some prisoners were hung from a meat hook so their arms were pulled out of joint by their own weight, but “obvious, long-term injuries” and scars left evidence of the torture, making the guards nervous. They developed new ways to tie the prisoners, rolling their bodies into balls and putting cloth under the rope to avoid burns. Thomas Moe was relieved when a “less hostile” guard returned in the middle of the night to loosen his ropes. Moe said, “If he hadn’t, I’m sure I would have lost both arms. In this case I would have vanished with the other badly injured POWs who never were repatriated.” While his statement cannot be proven, it is the common supposition among the POWs.

The rope trick was Vietnam’s favorite mode of torture because, as Konrad Trautman exclaims, “The pain is literally beyond description.” What made the ropes so powerful was their ability to cause as much pain after release as they caused before. Fifteen minutes into the session, the arms lose circulation and the nerves are pinched, making the upper torso go numb. Once the ropes are untied, “the procedure works completely in reverse,” as the blood rushes back in and the nerves regain their feeling. The guards were aware that the initial pain only lasted about fifteen minutes, so they returned every quarter hour to yank the arms higher and squeeze the cuffs tighter. If the

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116 Kimberlin, “Our POWs.”

117 Moe, “Pure Torture,” 94.

118 Different River, “Dick Durbin, Guantanamo, and Vietnam.”

119 Carroll, “Two Men, Two Fates.”
prisoner had not submitted within a few hours, the guards took additional measures. Moe recalled, “The guards came back and jerked up on the pole, lifting me up and down by my elbows then slamming me to the floor on my face or backward on my head.”

Of all the interrogators in Hanoi’s prison camps, the one called Pigeye was the master. He worked with scientific precision and “utter dispassion.” He “inflicted more pain on more Americans” than any other torturer. According to Jim Stockdale, “The man was medieval; a professional torturer, one who actually made a life’s work of inflicting intolerable pain on other people. There was no humanity to see anywhere in his face, nor in the efficient way he went about his grisly work.”

Pigeye and his fellow torturers had developed a formula that was almost guaranteed to bring a prisoner to his breaking point. Joe Kittinger experienced their handiwork firsthand:

I guess they’d worked out this whole routine pretty carefully because I’d never experienced pain like this before. I was actually hoping that the pressure would snap a bone and force me to lose consciousness. At a certain point, I knew that I wouldn’t be able to take it much longer and was ready to give up, but at that instant, before I could say anything, they loosened the ropes and relieved the pressure. My prayers had been answered. They left me tied to the bars, though, and the muscles in my arms were on fire.

The interrogator asked me again if I was willing to cooperate. I took a deep breath, shook my head, and the big guard tightened the ropes. In a matter of moments, I was in such agony that I couldn’t even think straight. Before I knew what I was saying, I told them I’d answer their questions.

Konrad Trautman echoed Kittinger’s reaction:

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120 Moe, “Pure Torture,” 94.

121 Guy, “Welcome to the Hanoi Hilton.”

122 Ibid.

123 Ibid.

124 Kittinger, Come Up and Get Me, 157.
I would gladly spend six months in solitary confinement rather than go through one 15 minute rope session. I would gladly do that, although in 15 minutes it’s all over. But I’m just trying to convey how great that torture with ropes is. I would personally take six months of isolation, minus pain, rather than 15 minutes in those straps.\footnote{Stephen Rowan, \textit{They Wouldn’t Let Us Die: The Prisoners of War Tell Their Story} (Middle Village, NY: Jonathan David Publishers, 1973), 46.}

Torture methods involving music will be revealed in the coming chapters.

\textbf{Breaking the Will}

They weren’t going to get anything out of me. I mean, I was Steve McQueen in “The Great Escape” — nothing. That lasted about an hour.

– Paul Galanti, “Two Men, Two Fates”\footnote{Carroll, “Two Men, Two Fates,” 11.}

“If a prisoner was tough enough not to break under torture, that probably meant he would die.”\footnote{Ibid.} This became common knowledge in the POW camps, where the men heard the screams of their fellow Americans suddenly go silent. A small group of prisoners yielded at the mere threat of torture, but most of the POWs forced the Vietnamese to work for every bit of propaganda they requested.\footnote{Hubbell, \textit{P.O.W.}, 524.} Their sense of duty and honor carried them through extended periods of unspeakable torture, but the Vietnamese knew how to break their prisoners’ will.

The POWs who survived this experience developed different methods of resisting the enemy, some successful and some fatal. One common technique came from survival training. As the instructors stuffed a soldier inside a box, they told him, “Get your head out of the box.”\footnote{Townley, \textit{Defiant}, 248.} Dissociation was not a permanent fix, but many prisoners managed to
detach their minds from their bodies. Richard Dutton claimed to watch his body from above: “I convinced myself it wasn’t me being tortured. In fact, I wondered what they were going to do next to the poor soul.” Jim Stockdale pictured himself walking past the cells of his friends in Alcatraz while whistling each of their distress songs. George Coker would “drift away for half-hour blocks” in which he would sing hymns and debate the meaning of life.

Unfortunately, the ability to mentally escape was limited. After weeks of torture, Coker could only dissociate for a brief moment before returning to concentrate on surviving the next few seconds. Thomas Moe stressed the importance of balance between pain and mental retreat:

I discovered that the more the body convulsed involuntarily, the more I could observe it as though it belonged to someone else. I found I could intellectualize pain, which allowed me to take a quantum leap in my tolerance of it. Sometimes, though, the problem was staying in touch with reality enough to keep alive. Detaching oneself too much has an insidious narcotic effect that invades one’s reason and dulls normal danger signals.

Ignoring the danger signals could lead to serious consequences, like death or permanent disability.

Several POWs spoke of an involuntary detachment from reality in the form of hallucinations, often auditory illusions. Bud Day heard pop music from home while he

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130 Wyatt, *We Came Home*, 169.
131 Townley, *Defiant*, 248.
132 Ibid., 120-21.
133 Ibid.
134 Moe, “Pure Torture,” 92.
was “flayed nearly to insanity.” Eugene McDaniel listened to Bing Crosby sing “White Christmas” on repeat in his head, and then he tried to sing along when he started to hear “September Song.” When the irons on his ankles became embedded in his bones, he visualized a key and imagined he removed them in “as real an experience as he had ever had.”

Since these fictional experiences were spontaneous acts of the subconscious mind, the effects could be positive or negative. After eight days on the stool, Allen Brady hallucinated instructions from his SRO that he was not to bow, earning him additional torture. Bill Tschudy enjoyed an imaginary lecture on the highlights of Las Vegas for several hours. Denton saw the knobs on the walls become the faces of angels and devils. He wrote, “The devils would come screaming and taunting; the angels would be singing and playing their harps.” When Ted Guy was near death and “cracking up” from fever, he noticed an image on the wall. He believed he saw someone say, “Don’t you ever give up. Don’t you dare.” His fever broke the next day and he somehow learned that his family knew he was alive. He never determined how that “message travelled both ways.”

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135 Hubbell, P.O.W., 498.
137 Hubbell, P.O.W., 500.
138 Rowan, They Wouldn’t Let Us Die, 198.
139 Ibid., 200.
140 Denton, “POW Tells How He Kept His Sanity,” 83.
141 Wyatt, We Came Home, 230.
While hallucinations may have been a welcome distraction during torture, they were also signs that a POW was losing touch with reality. Every prisoner knew, “Losing one’s mind meant death or a lifetime sentence to North Vietnam; nobody thought the North Vietnamese would return a prisoner who’d gone insane.”

Ted Guy saw two prisoners crack under the pressure and withdraw into a catatonic state. The Vietnamese isolated them and left them to die alone. Another American attempted to trick his captors into thinking he was insane by pretending to ride a “mythical motorcycle.” When he would not admit he was faking, he was put in solitary confinement. Without his companions to keep him grounded, he “got so deep in his subterfuge, that he was not able to ever bring himself out of it,” leading to his death.

A handful of prisoners tried the same scheme – pretending to have mental issues – and none of them returned home. J. J. Connell hoped the Vietnamese would consider any information he gave them implausible. Since they did not find his performance credible, they gave him four months of “electric shock treatments in the hope of either jolting him out of his play-acting or else, if he was truly sick, getting his mind to snap back so he could tell them what they wanted to know.” The treatments actually created the problem they were meant to cure, and Connell stopped eating.

A few POWs died from mental illness, whether real or pretend, after their time in the Cuban Torture Program. An interrogator they called Fidel was given free reign over a

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142 Townley, Defiant, 204.
143 Guy, “Welcome to the Hanoi Hilton.”
144 Ibid.
145 McDaniel, Before Honor, 80.
group of prisoners for a brainwashing experiment. Earl Cobeil refused to bow to his assailants, so Fidel hung him from ropes and “mauled” the pilot for twenty-four hours. After this session, Cobeil was placed in a cell with Jack Bomar and Ray Vohden. Bomar reported, “His hands were almost severed from the manacles. He had bamboo in his shins. All kinds of welts up and down all over; his face was bloody. He was a complete mess.” Cobeil’s mental state was equally dire. “He did not know where he was. I don't think he knew where he had been or where he was going.”

Vohden “tried everything imaginable to get Cobeil to come down to earth” to no avail. The men even “force-fed him by holding him down, putting a stick in his mouth, and pushing the food down his throat.” Still, they received no response. Bomar testified, “I saw Cobeil hit as many as 12 or 13 times [with a fan belt] directly in the face. He never blinked his eyes. He never opened his mouth. He just stood there.” Nevertheless, Fidel was convinced that Cobeil was faking and screamed, “Nobody’s gonna fake and get away with it…. I’m gonna teach you all a lesson…. I’m gonna break this guy in a million pieces.” As Cobeil withstood more beatings with “a vacant stare in his eyes already pushed by torture beyond the limit for which he might have a chance to regain his sanity,” Vohden claimed, “It had been far easier for me to endure the straps than to have

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146 Different River, “Dick Durbin, Guantanamo, and Vietnam.”


148 Ibid.

149 Ibid., 18.

150 Ibid., 13.

151 Different River, “Dick Durbin, Guantanamo, and Vietnam.”
to go through this.” Fidel “unmercifully beat a mentally defenseless, sick man to death.” 152 Every man in the Cuban Program either surrendered or died.

Although Fidel did not accept the insanity defense, the Vietnamese somehow knew which prisoners still held their will to survive and which ones were too far gone. Shortly after his capture, Fredrick Burns decided, “I don’t want to play no more.” 153 He refused to eat and was gone in less than three months. The Camp Authority allowed him to wither away, but many prisoners who made a conscious choice to end their lives could not do so. James Hughes and Thomas Moe both went on a hunger strike to avoid meeting with delegations of “anti-war groups or radical Hollywood personalities” because they assumed “an emaciated prisoner would not make good propaganda.” 154 Even though they refused to eat in the same way as Burns and Cobeil, Hughes and Moe were not left to die of starvation because their minds were still active and possibly useful to the Vietnamese.

Most POWs who underwent extreme torture wished for death during the experience, but the interrogators knew how to take the prisoners to the brink of death and then stop. William Stark wrote, “I was hoping all during this period that they’d kill me; that I could die. But, unfortunately, that was not one of the alternatives.” 155 Nels Tanner described his agony as “so excruciating he would have taken his own life to end it if he had been able.” 156 During a brutal torture session, Thomas Moe decided he wanted to die.

152 House Committee, Cuban Torture, 19.


154 Wyatt, We Came Home, 270; Moe, “Pure Torture,” 93.

155 Rowan, They Wouldn’t Let Us Die, ii.

“The only solution was to stop living, but what can you do when you’re tied up? You can’t will your heart to stop beating.”157 John McCain twice tried to hang himself with his pajama shirt, but a guard stopped him and put him on suicide watch.158 Likewise, Phil Butler and Bob Shumaker both tried to kill themselves by “beating their heads against walls,”159 but they were also interrupted. When Howard Rutledge was given the option of writing a confession or death, he took the pen and wrote, “DEATH!” His captors did not honor his choice and continued torturing him for a confession.160

**The Resistance**

Without the cold and desolation of winter  
There could not be the warmth and splendor of spring.  
Calamity has tempered and hardened me  
And turned my mind into steel.

– Ho Chi Minh, “Advice to Oneself”161

If suicide was not an option, dissociation was not effective, and feigning a mental illness was not viable, then what recourse did these prisoners have? Thomas Kirk explained, “I don’t care who you are. If I strap you up or rope you up, short of killing you, I can subject you to such pain that in a relatively short period of time your mind is going to overcome your will, and you are going to give something to get out of this pain, short of dying. Because, they will not let you die.”162 Was giving up the only answer?

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157 Moe, “Pure Torture,” 94.


160 Rutledge, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies*, 44.


162 Rowan, *They Wouldn’t Let Us Die*, ii.
Frank Anton agreed, “Those of us who survived faced the crushing of body, mind, and spirit to the point that we believed our only chance of clinging to the bare thread of life was to yield just enough to survive without betraying our country.”  

Maintaining their wits became top priority, so the POWs learned to offer information before the torture affected their minds. Robbie Risner ordered his subordinates, “Resist until you are tortured, but do not take torture to the point where you lose your capability to think and do not take torture to the point where you lose the permanent use of your limbs.” (Stockdale explained that forty-five minutes of blood stoppage would leave the arms dangling and useless for about six months.) When Howard Rutledge was reaching his limit, he said, “I determined that before I cracked completely, I would volunteer to answer their questions, hoping that while I still had some control, I could lie and deceive them and so survive.

The rules of Vietnam’s war games were not fair, so the pawns in those games learned how to cheat. Deception was the POWs’ best weapon and they became adept at knowing what kind of lie the enemy was most likely to believe, and at what point during the interrogation session they were most likely to believe it. It was a mistake to give up information too soon, because the enemy was

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suspicious of an easy mark; but at some point, each one needed to acknowledge that he had reached his limit.\textsuperscript{167}

William Baugh concurred, “There’s a point where you’ve completely had it. Where you lose control of your bowels, you throw up, you’ll sell your mother down the river in a heartbeat,” so they made up targets. He laughed, “I had ‘em bombing footbridges in China over creeks which I knew weren’t real targets.”\textsuperscript{168} Ed Mechenbier decided, “I’m fabricating. I’m lying. I’m cheating and I’m stealing,” because those were lesser sins than treason.\textsuperscript{169}

Yielding before they lost their faculties was imperative because each falsehood had to be carefully crafted. The soldiers were cautious to avoid revealing classified intelligence or any evidence against their fellow prisoners. George Coker noted, “You’d write down something about the government and throw all this other stuff in to make sure anybody else would realize it’s bogus trash.”\textsuperscript{170} They tried to include things that would catch an American’s eye but not alert the Vietnamese to their chicanery. Denton advised the POWs to give “harmless and inaccurate information that you can remember and repeat if tortured again.”\textsuperscript{171} Risner echoed this suggestion, “We have all broken. Now blow smoke up their ass.”\textsuperscript{172}

\begin{footnotesize}
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  \item[\textsuperscript{168}] “Return with Honor,” Online Forum, PBS Online.
  \item[\textsuperscript{169}] Ibid.
  \item[\textsuperscript{170}] Kimberlin, “Our POWs.”
  \item[\textsuperscript{171}] Townley, \textit{Defiant}, 69.
  \item[\textsuperscript{172}] Ibid., 124.
\end{itemize}
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Despite this wise counsel, most of the prisoners were eventually forced to disclose secrets or speak against their government, and the ensuing guilt and shame were often “as paralyzing and painful as the lash of the whip or constriction of the ropes.”173 The most common regret was how quickly they were broken. Everett Alvarez lamented, “I had vowed to die rather than confess lies yet when the time came I chose not to die. I had been tested and found wanting. I hollered for them to save my skin and this was the price I had agreed to pay. I capitulated during a single morning of torture.”174 These fighter pilots had expected themselves to withstand the pain in a heroic display of patriotism. They insisted that the Vietnamese hurt them, because “the compliance extracted by brute force is in no way so spiritually damaging as that given away on a mere threat.”175

In retrospect, the general consensus was that the POWs had done their best. Mike McGrath wrote, “Some were stronger and lasted longer. Some were weaker, and they broke in minutes. We all broke to some degree or other.”176 As Senator Frank Murkowski noted, “the price of loyalty was high, the reward for treason real and immediate.”177 The threat of future punishment in America was hardly a deterrent, as Nick Rowe joked that “his thoughts of the indoor toilets at Leavenworth made that appear to be a very attractive


174 Carroll, “Two Men, Two Fates,” 11.


alternative." Instead, they were driven by their individual and unified goal to return with honor, and they saw themselves as traitors. Alvarez recalled,

> We tried to excuse our treachery, wondering who, back in the U.S.A., would possibly believe the confessions anyway. But it didn’t help to think this way because we knew there would always be some people who would be fooled. Worse, still, we could not fool ourselves. We had acted against our basic values and no amount of self-deception would ever convince us otherwise.¹⁷⁹

Alan Brudno, the POW who committed suicide shortly after his release, explored this problem in the epic poem he composed in Hanoi:

> Against horrors so chilling, the spirit was willing
> But the flesh was too weak to withstand.
> Was it really a sin for a man to give in?
> Could I better resist each demand?²⁸⁰

Guilt and shame caused mental anguish, but many POWs found that hatred brought them to their lowest point. Eugene McDaniel explained, “I had allowed hate for them to enter, for hatred fanned the flames of my determination to win. But I was miserably broken for all of that.” Focusing on hate for his captors kept him from remembering who he was, until his country and his service meant nothing. He “was simply a human being sliding further and further toward death, and there was nothing at all to reach out for anymore, within or without.”²⁸¹ Thomas Moe called hatred “a terrible distraction, a horribly destructive enterprise,” and “one of the most corrosive elements of the human spirit.” As he drew strength from his hate, he attempted to overcome his pain.

¹⁷⁸ Rochester, *Honor Bound*, 236.
¹⁷⁹ Alvarez, *Chained Eagle*, 162.
²⁸⁰ Reel, “Eleven Letters.”
“with the most wicked solutions” straight “from the devil.”\(^{182}\) Denton discovered that “hating the dealer only clouded one’s judgment,”\(^ {183}\) and McCain implored the military to train all soldiers in “the necessity to forgive.”\(^ {184}\)

The most important directives in surviving the torture involved unity and recovery. When Harry Jenkins reluctantly confessed to giving up information, Stockdale reassured him, “Don’t feel like the Lone Ranger.”\(^ {185}\) The SRO’s policy was to “resist torture as long as you can,” and “not despair when they break you” because “everyone here has been tortured and bent.”\(^ {186}\) He later wrote, “Unity was our best hope.”\(^ {187}\) Alvarez reiterated, “Our strength lay in our unity. Our survival depended on solidarity.”\(^ {188}\) When another prisoner was being tortured in the cell next door, they “tapped out messages of support. ‘Hang in there, buddy. We’re with you all the way.’”\(^ {189}\) Eugene McDaniel and his cellmates heard Roger Lerseth screaming in the Quiz Room, so they “started singing songs to him loudly.” He recounted, “It meant everything to Lerseth to hear American

\(^{182}\) Moe, “Pure Torture,” 95.

\(^{183}\) Townley, Defiant, 69.


\(^{185}\) Townley, Defiant, 55.


\(^{188}\) Alvarez, Chained Eagle, 163.

\(^{189}\) Ibid.
voices in that dark hour, telling him who we were, how we were organized, what to do, and so on.”

For men who had dedicated their lives to the military, structure and regulations were a necessity. The Code of Conduct was clearly inadequate in this situation, since any POWs who refused to go beyond the Big Four were tortured to death. Stockdale recognized that his comrades “wanted above all else to enter a society of peers that had rules putting some criteria of right and wrong into their lives.” They could not be the perfect soldiers they strived to be, but they could do their best and choose to suffer together in a “unified resistance program.” However, Stockdale explained, telling them to simply do their best was insulting. “They demanded to be told exactly what to take torture for. They saw that it was only on that basis that life for them could be made to make sense, that their self-esteem could be maintained, and that they could sleep with a clear conscience at night.”

Likewise, Denton issued the specific orders to “roll back, bounce back,” meaning that even if you were tortured into talking, “you don’t just lie back and continue to give them things as they just gradually exploit you.” Each time they asked for information, they would need to torture you again. After Jim Mulligan was tortured into writing a statement in Alcatraz, his interrogator, “Softsoap,” told him, “This will never do. You must repent. You must give yourself over to me and do what I tell you.” Mulligan countered, “That’s it. That’s all I’ll write.” Softsoap entered a rage, threatening the

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190 McDaniel, Before Honor, 79.

191 Stockdale, In Love and War, 247.

192 “Return with Honor,” Online Forum, PBS Online.
prisoner with injuries and death. “You fool!” he spat. “No one cares about you. Your people won’t care about this.” Mulligan defiantly yelled, “I don’t care if no one else cares what I do. I care and that’s all that counts. And [the other POWs] care too! What you do to one of us, you must do to all of us here.” Even in the worst of prison camps, where complete silence was enforced, Mulligan knew that his fellow Americans had his back and he drew strength from that knowledge.

Whenever new shootdowns arrived in the camps, the POWs told them,

Don’t sweat it if they torture something out of you. We have all been through it. The important thing is to get back up as quickly as you can and get set for the next round. You’re going to get depressed. If it is at all possible to do so, contact someone else. Talk about it. Don’t keep it to yourself. Just talking about it helps.

The efficacy of the SRO’s directives became clear during a quiz in the Hanoi Hilton, when the interrogators told Stockdale, “Your instructions have even been understood at camps many kilometers from here. You set our treatment regime back two years!”

Although many POWs were tortured to death, and others endured the most gruesome, inhuman treatment imaginable, the experiences of the American prisoners in Vietnam taught us a valuable lesson: “The human spirit can endure much more than the average man ever is called upon to endure. Every man has his breaking point but, once broken, he can recover and resist again. There is a kind of spiritual second wind.” The next chapter will examine North Vietnam’s use of music torture and the human spirit’s ability to withstand psychological attacks.

193 Townley, Defiant, 237.
195 Ibid.
Chapter Twelve

Music Torture

One thing that makes music so powerful is that it activates circuits in the brain that are not under conscious control. It has the power to augment all human drives, including aggression. Whether it’s a soundtrack for a battle or one for torture, both work. In each instance, you can use music to facilitate the process.

– Herbert Friedman, “The Use of Music in Psychological Operations”¹

This introduction to music torture will give a historical background of its concepts, processes, and uses. Explanations and theories from musicologists, journalists, and those involved in the torture will be analyzed. I spent a great deal of time examining the U.S. military and CIA torture programs because these are the only organizations which have released classified information to the public, thanks to the Freedom of Information Act. Vietnam has no such policy, and their government still denies torturing its American prisoners (although the United Nations Committee Against Torture verified that torture of prisoners in Vietnam remained a problem in 2018). Since the Politburo will not admit to these actions, they certainly will not give details or explain their motivations. Therefore, an in-depth survey of America’s torture system could perhaps give some insight into Vietnam’s similar programs.

The power of music is a phenomenon long recognized but never entirely understood. The ancient Greeks admired its capacity to influence the soul, and philosophers throughout time understood that “there is nothing more uplifting nor potentially devastating.”² Music has been a therapeutic treatment in cultures across the


globe, and recent research proves its effectiveness without comprehending why it works. Pulse, temperature, respiration, and specific regions of the central nervous system are significantly influenced by music. Romeo Vitelli theorized that the body’s physiological responses stem from the “broad range of emotional responses” that music can evoke.³

Most research on the power of music has focused on its positive applications, including physical and mental health. Steve Goodman emphasized music’s “seductive power to caress the skin, to immerse, to soothe, beckon, and heal, to modulate brain waves and massage the release of certain hormones within the body.”⁴ Robert Zatorre explained, “Music increases cross talk between brain structures in old reward centers that handle pleasure and newer areas at the cortex that handle prediction and anticipation.”⁵ However, music also has the power to induce negative responses in the body, making it the only artform that can intrinsically cause pain. At a volume of only eighty decibels, the blood pressure begins to rise, digestion slows, pupils dilate, and skin pales, hearkening back to the Stone Age, when loud sounds denoted danger.⁶ The auditory system’s connection to the fight or flight mechanisms allows noise to incite both emotions and actions.⁷

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³ Friedman, “The Use of Music in Psychological Operations.”


⁵ Friedman, “The Use of Music in Psychological Operations.”


The fact that music can produce both pleasure and pain is still a paradox, especially since a piece of music that brings one person pleasure can cause another person pain. Personal preference and cultural background may contribute to this dichotomy, but they do not explain why certain sounds cause physical reactions like chills, nausea, and vertigo in a percentage of the population. The “intensity, complexity, variability, predictability, and meaning of sound stimuli” all contribute to the arousal of the nervous system, but changes in the timing produce the largest response in the auditory system.\(^8\) Laura Mitchell hypothesized that whether we perceive music as pleasure or pain “depends upon the degree to which we are able to control the music, the musical environment, and the circumstances in which the music is heard.”\(^9\) A lack of control could explain why a sudden termination of sound can be as provocative as its commencement.\(^10\)

Long before amplifiers made music a physical threat, Immanuel Kant discussed music’s unique “ability to reach inside people’s most private sphere regardless of their will.”\(^11\) He believed that music “imposes itself, thus interfering with the freedom of others, outside of the musical circle, which the arts that speak to the eyes do not do, since one need only turn one’s eyes away if one would not admit their impression.”\(^12\) Now that

\(^8\) Ibid., 293.


\(^10\) Westman, “Noise and Stress,” 293.


noise carries the risk of organ damage, many bands pride themselves on their excessive volume. Michael Gira of the “noise-rock bludgeoners” band Swans explained, “It’s really very much an extreme spiritual pursuit, like a heat lodge or something. Or if you’re maybe having tantric sex and it keeps building and building and it never releases.”¹³ The Swans and their fans may find the vibrations transcendent, but anyone who did not appreciate their music but was compelled to sit through a concert would likely leave with a headache at the very least.

The unpleasantness of that experience pales in comparison to legitimate music torture, but it demonstrates Suzanne Cusick’s summation of the philosophical debate: “If one believes that music can produce a subjectivity, which is the belief that comes attached to the notion of music providing access to the sublime, it then follows that a godlike music that can, so to speak, give life, can also take it away.”¹⁴ Since there are no recorded instances of music torture leading to death, I believe Cusick was referring to the death of self. She expounded on this idea in a different article: “Listening to music can dissolve subjectivity, releasing a person into a paradoxical condition that is both highly embodied and almost disembodied in the intensity with which one forgets important elements of one’s identity, and loses track of time’s passing.”¹⁵

If it is hard to imagine someone losing identity from listening to music, it might be easier to see how music is used to control. Corporate behavior modification through

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¹³ Weingarten, “Feel the Noise.”


music has existed since at least the 1930s, when the Muzak company created calming melodies for elevators. Now restaurants and stores pipe in carefully selected tunes to create an atmosphere most conducive to their business and make customers “behave in ways that they have not freely chosen.” Shopping malls and other public spaces play classical music “to dissuade young people from gathering.”16

Using music to manipulate the body’s automatic and conditioned responses is not a new idea,17 and its uses have often involved warfare—to give courage to one side and intimidate the other.18 Jehoshaphat, the ancient king of Judah, sent singers ahead of his army in the legendary battle against multiple nations which turned on each other.19 In the last few centuries, musicians controlled the battlefield with drums and bugles which “conveyed messages, kept the marching pace, and signaled the end of the fighting day.”20 The music that encouraged one side could be equally frightening to the other. Bagpipes were employed as both morale boosters in Normandy and intimidation in the Scottish

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18 Ibid.


The sound of drums could urge soldiers to march with pride or provoke terror in one awaiting the executioner’s axe.22

Since specific sounds can have such contrary effects, using music in battle or torture is a complex technique with the potential to backfire. Intelligence agencies in the US, UK, and Canada recognized the need for research after the Second World War, when the psychological community was enthralled with the new concept of behaviorism and a renewed interest in musical hypnosis.23 “Brainwashing” became a major concern as the Western world feared that the Communists had developed mind control and the ability to destroy autonomy through external forces.

The Central Intelligence Agency began intense study of several “no touch” torture techniques, many of which involved music and sound. They discovered that sonic disturbances “induced feelings of helplessness and could be more effective on prisoners than beatings, starvation or sleep deprivation.”24 In the 1950s, experiments at McGill University in Montreal explored the efficacy of sensory deprivation and overload in coercive interrogation. Test subjects listened to “four repetitions of 16 bars from ‘Home on the Range;’ a five-minute extract from a harsh atonal piece of music; and an excerpt from an essay instructing and exhorting young children on the methods and desirability

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23 Kennaway, “Music and the War on the Nerves.”

of attaining purity of soul.” The results showed that “a changing sensory environment is absolutely essential to the good health of the mind.”25 The lack of diverse external stimuli prevented proper brain function and led to abnormal behaviors such as hallucinations. The researchers concluded that “sensory isolation techniques” made a prisoner more “receptive to the implantation of ideas contrary to previously held beliefs.”26

The McGill experiments proved that sensory manipulation “could break down a person’s identity and trigger psychosis.”27 Methods of controlling a prisoner’s environment were meticulously developed, including hooding, constant noise/silence, disorientation, and sporadic hunger.28 Some of these methods were discovered from their use on American POWs in the Korean War29 and others were taken from pop culture. The 1950s saw an increase in the “Pavlovian view of music as brainwashing” with the birth of rock and roll. William Sargant’s book, Battle for the Mind, portrayed this music as a danger to the brain.30 The psychological concepts of reflex action depicted music as a “trigger of neurological responses that could be manipulated by those in power.”31 Thus,


26 Ibid.


28 Cusick, “Music as Torture/Music as Weapon,” 5.


30 Kennaway, “Music and the War on the Nerves.”

31 Ibid.
the CIA and others worked diligently “to establish music as a deliberate means of
inflicting harm on people’s physical and mental health via the nervous system.”

Their research on sensory overload found that interminable sound, regardless of
volume, was as effective as the silence of sensory deprivation chambers in disorienting a
prisoner. Neuroscience experiments showed that exposure to “intense auditory and
visual stimuli” produced “heightened and sustained arousal, discomfort, mood changes,
illusions and hallucinations and body image distortions, irritability, distraction,
disorientation and a withdrawal from reality,” as well as various pathologies and
thoughts associated with schizophrenia.

The CIA compiled its classified “Kubark Counterintelligence Interrogation
Handbook” in 1963, outlining the results of sensory deprivation experiments and their
application in questioning combatants. They provided training on their “principal
coercive techniques,” which are “arrest, detention, deprivation of sensory stimuli through
solitary confinement or similar methods, threats and fear, debility, pain, heightened
suggestibility and hypnosis, narcosis, and induced regression.” The section on sensory

32 Ibid.
33 Suzanne G. Cusick, “‘You Are in a Place That Is Out of the World. . . ’: Music in the Detention
Camps of the ‘Global War On Terror.’” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2, no. 1 (February

34 John Leach, “Psychological Factors in Exceptional, Extreme and Torturous Environments,
*Extreme Physiology & Medicine* 5, no. 7 (June 2016),


36 CIA, “KUBARK Counterintelligence Interrogation, July 1963,” National Security Archive, 85,
https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB122/3-13-14_MR9864_RES_PART2.pdf (accessed
December 28, 2020).
deprivation contains the conclusions of psychiatrists from journal articles that confirm this method induces unbearable stress, leading some subjects to “progressively lose touch with reality, focus inwardly, and produce delusions, hallucinations, and other pathological effects.”

The CIA handbook neglects to mention torture by music or sound, but Suzanne Cusick argued that “the techniques of ‘no-touch torture’ were used—indeed, consciously tested again and again—by the CIA’s counter-insurgency forces in Vietnam into the 1970s.” The techniques she referred to included both noise and silence. Since the techniques studied by the CIA were based on those used on American POWs in Korea, I looked for any sign of music torture there. I found no evidence of sonic assault in the public records, but a Senate hearing on the subject mentioned, “The captors strive for control over the sights, sounds, and feelings that the prisoner experiences.” A Senate report adds, “Coercive interrogation and extraction of false confessions were other practices employed.” These statements do not confirm the use of sensory overload in the Korean POW camps, but they maintain the possibility that the North Koreans controlled the sounds a prisoner experienced as a means of coercive interrogation. Albert Biderman published a chart of coercive methods used by the Chinese communists in

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38 Cusick, “Music as Torture/Music as Weapon,” 6.


Korea. With eight categories and thirty-seven different practices, the list contains nothing related to either the excess or lack of sound, but sleep deprivation, which could be enforced through noise, is included.\textsuperscript{41}

Whether or not the method came home with the POWs, the US military began training its most vulnerable soldiers to withstand music torture after the Korean War. Originally implemented by the Air Force, the Survive, Evade, Resist, Escape (SERE) course prepared troops for capture and the potential treatment therein. Enduring the torture and interrogation methods favored by the current enemy while in a classroom setting helped the soldiers survive those methods in real life.\textsuperscript{42} As quoted in the Kubark handbook, John Lilly explained, “It was the first exposure which caused the greatest fears and hence the greatest danger of giving way to symptoms; previous experience is a powerful aid in going ahead, despite the symptoms.”\textsuperscript{43} SERE graduates were therefore less likely to reveal damaging information to the enemy. The extent of a student’s instruction depended on his probability of capture. From the outset, pilots were the only ones subjected to this course because they were presumed to be in the greatest danger. During the Vietnam War, Army and Navy personnel were added to the roster.

The methods covered in SERE were mostly based on the experiences of former POWs, especially from the Korean War, since the Chinese communists likewise trained the Vietnamese. Techniques such as waterboarding and sleep deprivation were practiced


on soldiers who feared for their lives, the mock torture feeling very authentic. However, one of the most hated tactics of SERE survivors was the non-lethal playing of loud music, which was reportedly used as early as 1958, before the Vietnam War began. Joe Garner wrote, “We put a guy in a dumpster and shoved a loudspeaker right against the thing full volume, blaring ‘Lollipop, lollipop…oh, lolli, lolli…’ all day long. The guy came out almost a vegetable.”

One SERE instructor reported that avant-garde music was “a vital part of SERE’s interrogation-resistance training.” American Navy veteran Donald Vance was swept up in a raid while working undercover for the FBI in Iraq. He was taken to a prison camp where he was tortured with the constant repetition of Queen’s “We Are the Champions.” He continued talking to himself and “trying to keep a rational train of thought going,” because once the music overrides your thoughts, you cannot recover your mind. Thanks to his military training, he left the prison “damaged” but not “broken.”

Ironically, this effective training may also have been the catalyst for Vietnam using music as torture. In an East German propaganda film about the Vietnam POWs, the producers included scenes of American soldiers attending SERE in a simulated POW camp. One scene shows a man standing inside a metal barrel as an instructor beats on the barrel with an axe. The narrator says, “Noise torture. Anyone subjected to this for more...

44 Pieslak, “Cranking up the Volume,” 5.
45 Friedman, “The Use of Music in Psychological Operations.”
than 20 minutes suffers total physical collapse.” Could North Vietnam have discovered sonic torture from the *Pilots in Pajamas* film? It could never be proven, but it is possible that training Americans for music torture in SERE consequently facilitated the need for that training.

**Justification and Application of Music Torture**

First, it is not at all clear that the music aimed at prisoners in detention camps has functioned as music. Rather, it has more often functioned as sheer sound with which to assault a prisoner’s sense of hearing; to “mask” or disrupt a prisoner’s capacity to sustain an independent thought; to disrupt a prisoner’s sense of temporality (both in terms of how much time had passed and in terms of the predictability of temporal units); to undermine a prisoner’s ability to sustain somatic practices of prayer (both through behavior at the hours of prayer and through abstinence from musical experiences considered sinful); and to bombard the prisoner’s body (skin, nerves and bones) with acoustical energy.

– Suzanne G. Cusick, *Musicology, Torture, Repair* 49

The use of music in psychological operations has greatly increased over the last century as technology provides more and more powerful weapons of sonic warfare. The Axis and Allied Forces both employed this practice during World War II. Soviets under siege in Leningrad blasted the Germans with operetta arias and Argentinian tangos to deprive them of sleep. 50 The Radio Committee gathered all surviving musicians to play Dmitri Shostakovich’s “Leningrad” Symphony with the dual purpose of propaganda and psychological warfare. The concert displayed the city’s “spirit, courage, and readiness to

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50 Friedman, “The Use of Music in Psychological Operations.”
fight,” which bolstered the hopes of those who were freezing and starving to death while demoralizing the enemy who “understood that a city of people who showed such spirit would not capitulate.” Meanwhile in Auschwitz, the Germans controlled the victims of concentration camps by playing foxtrots to confuse them during executions and marching music to drown out gunshots.

In the sixties, the Americans bombarded the Vietnamese with huge speakers attached to helicopters, as recreated in *Apocalypse Now*. Kilgore smirks, “Put on psy war op. Make it loud.” With the first stroke of the violins, Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyries” sends the villagers scrambling. In the nineties, an entire nation watched as the FBI weaponized sound against the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas. In an attempt to force the cult members out of the compound, the agents inundated them night and day with such noises as dying rabbits and ringing telephones, in addition to repeated music.

In 2004, the 361st PsyOps company kicked off the siege of Fallujah by projecting Metallica into the city with a Long Range Acoustic Device (LRAD). A spokesman credited the success of their “harassment missions” on the urban environment where the sounds “keep reverberating off the walls.” In addition to the psychological effects

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55 Salem, “Death Fugue.”

56 Cusick, “Music as Torture/Music as Weapon,” 3.
produced by the LRAD and other infrasonic weapons, the music itself can be weaponized, as those on the receiving end have reported “blown out eardrums, dizziness, ringing, and temporary deafness.” 57 With a maximum of 159 dB, the LRAD can project intelligible sound for three thousand meters. 58 For comparison, 100 dB (such as a car horn or sporting event) can cause hearing loss in fifteen minutes, and 110 dB (shouting directly into the ear) takes only two minutes to cause damage. 59

The most recent use of music in U.S. psychological warfare was the highly-publicized music torture in Guantánamo Bay. After the attacks on September 11, 2001, the CIA was tasked with finding the people responsible, but their interrogations were curbed by legal restrictions. The “CIA Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual” clearly states that torture is not permitted: “The use of force, mental torture, threats, insults, or exposure to unpleasant and inhumane treatment of any kind as an aid to interrogation is prohibited by law, both international and domestic; it is neither authorized nor condoned.” 60 If they wanted their prisoners to talk, the CIA needed some new methods.

The interrogators needed a system of “no touch” tactics which left no scars behind. Methods such as sleep deprivation, stress positions, extreme temperature variances, and loud music seemed “more humane” since they were not physically violent,

57 Melissa Kagen, “Controlling Sound: Musical Torture from the Shoah to Guantánamo,” Appendix 1, no. 3 (July 2013), 3.


implying that “torture has been civilized.”\textsuperscript{61} Supporters of the program boasted of their “non-lethal, non-harmful techniques…which leave no long-lasting effects but do have the end result of breaking down the individual’s will to resist questioning.”\textsuperscript{62} No touch torture involves the use of “futility” techniques which are designed to “persuade a detainee that resistance to interrogation is futile.”\textsuperscript{63} As the CIA manual explains, “The purpose of all coercive techniques is to induce psychological regression in the subject by bringing a superior outside force to bear on his will to resist. Regression is basically a loss of autonomy, a reversion to an earlier behavioral level.”\textsuperscript{64}

The CIA’s adoption of music torture was a logical step at the time. Music leaves no visible scars, and the general public has little understanding of how their favorite pastime could be used to harm another. I have personally witnessed many people scoff at the idea and mock those who underwent this technique. When James Hetfield discovered that his music was being used to interrogate prisoners in Iraq, he was honored that he could possibly help quell another terrorist attack. He boasted, “We’ve been punishing our parents, our wives, our loved ones with this music forever. Why should the Iraqis be any different? Part of me is proud because they chose Metallica!”\textsuperscript{65}

\textsuperscript{61} Kagen, “Controlling Sound,” 2.


\textsuperscript{63} Cusick, “‘You Are in a Place That Is Out of the World,’” 1.


When the news broke about the CIA’s torture program, journalists were more interested in which music was used than how it affected its victims. In fact, many articles focused entirely on the playlist, often with sarcastic quips about the efficacy of certain songs. Bob Singleton, composer of “I Love You,” the theme song to Barney the Purple Dinosaur, thought the premise that his music could be used as torture was “absolutely ludicrous.” He wrote, “A song that was designed to make little children feel safe and loved was somehow going to threaten the mental state of adults and drive them to the emotional breaking point?”\textsuperscript{66} When writers at \textit{Newsweek} sought a comment about the ability of children’s songs to break a mind, they “endured five minutes of Barney while on hold,” claiming “Yes, it broke us, too.”\textsuperscript{67}

With so many mainstream articles written in jest, it is no surprise that most Americans flippantly disregarded the reports. They could not imagine Barney’s song being anything more than annoying. However, scholarly journals took a different approach, arguing that any music could be used as torture. Jonathan Pieslak made a convincing case for the designation of torture:

\begin{quote}
The use of music in interrogation is not an issue of it either is torture or it isn’t; rather, it is a case of when can it be torture, where is the line, and who decides? When does aural discomfort become sonic antagonization, and when does sonic antagonization become torture? Most people would probably consider waterboarding, beatings, and intimidation by dogs as forms of torture. Matters aren’t so clear with music and sound. Is listening to a tape of babies crying for half-an-hour torture? Irritating for sure but probably not torture. Is using deafening music as a form of sleep deprivation for five straight days torture? I would say yes.\textsuperscript{68}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{66} Worthington, “A History of Music Torture.”


\textsuperscript{68} Pieslak, “Cranking up the Volume,” 9.
The soldiers and agents responsible for playing the music did not see it as torture, but as a way to “frustrate, irritate, disorient, or sleep-deprive a combat adversary.”\(^{69}\) C. J. Grisham claimed the music was employed “to get on these people’s nerves” and “break down their resistance.”\(^{70}\) Mark Hadsell said the goal was to make the prisoners “emotionally exhausted.” He explained, “Say you’re up for 24 hours straight, music pounding in the background—nine times out of ten you’ll just answer a question without thinking.”\(^{71}\)

I am reluctant to pass harsh judgment on the Americans who used these methods. They likely did not understand the damage they were doing, since they were required to stay with the prisoners and withstand the same barrage of sound. A Gitmo guard explained, “You couldn’t keep somebody up while you went to bed. If you can stay up, they can stay up. If you could take the music, they can take the music.”\(^{72}\) What the Americans failed to understand is that they were in constant control of their environment, giving them the advantage. They could turn down the volume or stop the music at any time. They could choose songs that they enjoyed. They had the power. Suzanne Cusick asserted that the “utter powerlessness” of the detainees transformed the music “from annoying to torturous.”\(^{73}\) The additional stresses of fear, fatigue, uncertainty, and physical pain from stress positions made the music even more unbearable.

\(^{69}\) Ibid., 2.

\(^{70}\) Pieslak, “Cranking up the Volume,” 6.

\(^{71}\) Peisner, “Music as Torture: War Is Loud,” 7.

\(^{72}\) Ibid.

\(^{73}\) Cusick, “‘You Are in a Place That Is Out of the World,’” 17.
Losing control of one’s environment is a defining characteristic of imprisonment, so why does the addition of music push prisoners over the edge? I hypothesize that music has the power to reach beyond the exterior environment, gaining control over the subject’s soul or psyche. Adam Shatz noted that rock concert attendees understand that music’s “power lies in the fact that it seems inescapable, at once outside and inside the listener’s body.”

Fans often boast of losing themselves in the music, suggesting that they experience a loss of identity, which is a crucial component of breaking a prisoner’s will. The psychological space is invaded, silencing the subject’s “ability for individual thought.” Whereas victims of physical torture have the option to dissociate, escaping into the fortress of their mind, the prisoners subjected to music torture have no safe place to hide. As Cusick explains, victims of physical torture still have their thought processes, but after “acoustical torture, you’re gone.”

This loss of autonomy is the torturer’s goal. In 1976, the European Human Rights Commission detailed a “modern system of torture” which combines “sensory disorientation” with physical and psychological “self-inflicted pain” with the purpose of causing a prisoner’s “identity to disintegrate.” This disintegration may take the form of regression to infantile behavior or induced schizophrenia. While these outcomes would

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75 Salem, “Death Fugue.”


77 Koester, “Suzanne Cusick Asserts ‘Acoustical Violence.’”

require months of physical beatings or starvation, the modern system achieves results in a few days. The prisoner becomes mentally incapable of resistance. With no hope for relief, the detainee must depend on his captor to end his suffering.

Prior to the publicity of music torture at Guantánamo Bay, scientists focused on the physical harm loud music wrought on listeners, such as hearing loss and hypertension. When musicologists discovered the CIA’s methods, the focus changed from the physical to the psychological damage music provoked. Cusick often emphasized the destruction of subjectivity and the “distinction between private and public space.” However, survivors of this torture program claimed to have physically suffered from the music as well. Marco Accattatis explained, “Extremely loud music has the capacity to make the body resonate like a sounding board, thus bypassing the ear canal altogether. This is especially true in the age of electricity, where sound can be amplified to levels which can be harmful or even fatal to the human body.” The Guardian reported, “Some prisoners have said it can be even worse than more traditional methods of physical torture, including waterboarding.”

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79 Cusick, “Music as Torture/Music as Weapon,” 7.

80 Barnes, “11 Popular Songs the CIA Used to Torture.”


82 Cusick, “Music as Torture/Music as Weapon,” 7.

83 Accattatis, “Music, Violence, and Militarism.”

The most common complaints of the detainees were vomiting, headaches, sleep deprivation, hallucination, PTSD, hopelessness, hypersensitivity to noise, and suicide attempts.\textsuperscript{85} One prisoner, Binyam Mohamed, spent seven years in Guantánamo, enduring beatings, razor slashings, and being hung up for a week, but he claimed that music torture was the “hardest to bear.”\textsuperscript{86} Another detainee, Ruhal Ahmed, recalled, “It’s as if you had very bad migraines, and then someone shows up and yells at you – and take that times a thousand. You can’t concentrate on anything.”\textsuperscript{87}

The immediate reactions to the music were often violent and involuntary. The prisoners urinated and defecated on themselves and tore their hair out. Self-mutilation and suicide attempts were common.\textsuperscript{88} The prisoners’ reports are distressing, as Mohamed testified, “Plenty lost their minds. I could hear people knocking their heads against the walls and the doors, screaming their heads off.”\textsuperscript{89} Donald Vance, a wrongly imprisoned military contractor, recounted that music torture “can make innocent men go mad.”\textsuperscript{90} He admitted, “I had no blanket or sheet. If I had, I would probably have tried suicide.”\textsuperscript{91}

\textsuperscript{85} Lin, “De-trivialising Music Torture.”

\textsuperscript{86} Davies, “Torture Music Leaves No Marks.”


\textsuperscript{89} Davies, “Torture Music Leaves No Marks.”

\textsuperscript{90} Worthington, “A History of Music Torture.”

These men experienced the loss of directed thought, and their greatest fear was never recovering their mental faculties. Vance said, “It sort of removes you from you. You can no longer formulate your own thoughts when you’re in an environment like that.” Ahmed lamented, “It makes you feel like you are going mad. You lose the plot, and it’s very scary to think that you might go crazy because of all the music, because of the loud noise and because after a while you don’t hear the lyrics at all, all you hear is heavy banging.” Mohamed recalled, “You lose control and start to hallucinate. You’re pushed to a threshold, and you realize that insanity is lurking on the other side. And once you cross that line, there’s no going back. I saw that threshold several times.”

For many detainees, the psychological scars were too deep to heal. Years after release, they still suffered from crippling paranoia and refused to leave their homes. Stephen Xenakis, an Army psychiatrist, confirmed that music torture is “traumatizing to the brain. It will lead to anxiety and the kind of symptoms you get with post-traumatic stress disorder.” Just as a blown-out tire can trigger PTSD flashbacks in a soldier, music can prompt these symptoms in former torture victims. Ahmed complained that he “can no longer listen to music and if he hears a track that was used to torture him he suffers horrific flashbacks.” Shafiq Rasul agreed, “Even today, when I hear any loud noise, I

92 Ibid.

93 Barnes, “11 Popular Songs the CIA Used to Torture.”

94 Nippard, “Sticks and Stones Break Bones.”


get disturbed.""98 Cusick noted that one detainee was “extremely sensitive to ambient sound,” and Vance confirmed that he maintained a “very quiet” home.100 Even for former rock music enthusiasts, a few days of torture ruined music forever.

This begs the question: Is music necessary for aural torture? They could easily substitute any of the grating noises that make people plug their ears – a siren, nails on a chalkboard, or squeaking brakes. Even white noise generators cause the same physical reactions. Why, then, did the CIA and many other governments choose to torture their prisoners with music? Morag Grant postulated that the choice is a “matter of convenience,” with recordings being more readily available than a sound generator.101 In the case of soldiers interrogating prisoners with the contents of their iPods, this makes sense, but the CIA black sites were meticulously planned around music. Grant also mentioned that music is often used to mask the sounds of torture, but again, in a facility designed for torture, hiding the screams is hardly a valid justification.

The most logical explanation for employing music in torture is how easily the artform can be customized for each detainee’s discomfort.102 With almost limitless varieties of genres and messages, music is a powerful tool for “cultural imposition.”103 Martin Cloonan asserts, “Our musical tastes are key components of our subjectivity and

99 Nippard, “Sticks and Stones Break Bones.”
100 Lowe-Bianco, “Metallica’s Lars Ulrich.”
102 Nippard, “Sticks and Stones Break Bones.”
103 Gupta, “Torture by Music.”
we do not like it when they are abused. We like it still less when music we dislike is imposed on us.”

This is easily observed when a teenager must listen to his parents’ favorite album, or a traditional church tries to introduce contemporary songs into the service. Musical styles from outside of our culture can have an even greater effect on our emotions, especially when we have no control over the selections and no ability to silence them. In fact, several governments chose torture songs that emphasized the superiority of their culture, consequently belittling the prisoners.

As mentioned earlier, the American media publicized the playlist from Guantánamo Bay, and several of the songs elicited laughter from the general public. They could not understand how certain genres could possibly be considered torture. Aditi Gupta categorized the playlist as “threatening music, annoying music, sexually provocative music, and songs that expressed western dominance.”

Melissa Kagen placed the songs in similar categories: “angry/aggressive, culturally uncomfortable/ironic, nationalistic, and juvenile/sentimental.” The first and last of these categories were especially popular in Iraq, where C. J. Grisham interrogated captives. He used heavy metal and children’s songs “to get on these people’s nerves [to] break down their resistance.” He noted, “You just want to find some way to put a wedge between that resistance. And once you chip away a little bit of it, it starts crumbling.”

104 Cloonan, “Bad Vibrations.”

105 Gupta, “Torture by Music.”

106 Kagen, “Music as Torture in Auschwitz and Guantamano.”

The theme song from “Barney” and many other children’s television programs were considered “futility music” because of their highly repetitive nature, which supposedly taught prisoners the “futility of maintaining their silence.” According to the Wall Street Journal, Barney’s “I Love You,” a “sugary lump of fear inducing madness,” was the “most overused song in the U.S. interrogator’s arsenal.” Lane DeGregory was amazed that the Army did not “recognize the irritation potential of children’s songs” sooner. She wrote, “Anyone who’s had a preschooler knows the pain: sing-songy, cotton-colored puppets crooning over and over again about happy, joyful things…. Incessant. Mind-numbing. An agonizing infliction of unbearable assault.”

On the other end of the spectrum, angry, aggressive, or threatening music included heavy metal and rap. Danny Gallagher explained, “Heavy metal songs have long been a favorite tool of military interrogators. They’re loud, often repetitive and (as any parent with steadily reduced hearing can attest) can even create feelings of physical pain or discomfort to the ears and head.” Heavy metal is part of a “long tradition of rebellious styles of music that are constantly flirting with torture, music made to grate on the nerves of parents.” Mark Rabnett called the genre “frightening” thanks to its repetitive thrashing, high distortion, and guttural invective. Adam Shatz claimed these

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108 Kennaway, “Music and the War on the Nerves.”


110 Ibid.


112 Gallagher, “Six Songs Used to Torture.”

113 Rabnett, “The Weaponization of Music.”

114 Ibid.
songs put listeners “in the mood to fight because their pounding, syncopated rhythms sound very like a volley of bullets being fired from an automatic gun.”\textsuperscript{115}

Since the 1980s, industrial bands have used their music to express the “dark side of power and violence.”\textsuperscript{116} Tobias Rapp asserted that metal is “a direct product of a young man’s hell, music that tells of the anguish and pain of being a young man.”\textsuperscript{117} According to Cusick, people outside of the mainstream U.S. culture believe metal embodies “the sounds of masculine rage,” allowing American soldiers to defeat their captives “in a struggle of masculinities.”\textsuperscript{118} I question whether the soldiers purposely selected tracks full of fury, or simply pressed shuffle on their iPods. As Rabnett emphasized, “the choice of torture music generally reflects the taste of the torturers.”\textsuperscript{119} One interrogator admitted, “We started out playing stuff we’d gotten from the MPs, which was, like, unlistenable death metal. But we had to sit there and listen, too, so after a while, I’d play whatever I wanted.”\textsuperscript{120} When drummer Lars Ulrich discovered that his music was used to “create fear, disorient…and prolong capture shock” of detainees, he suggested “30 Norwegian death metal bands that would make Metallica sound like Simon and Garfunkel,” noting that his music was helping “a lot of scared 18, 19, and 20-year-old kids out there who are out on the front lines and who are doing a hell of a job.”\textsuperscript{121} His

\textsuperscript{115} Shatz, “Short Cuts,” 23.

\textsuperscript{116} Rapp, “Pain of Listening.”

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{118} Cusick, “Music as Torture/Music as Weapon,” 11.

\textsuperscript{119} Rabnett, “The Weaponization of Music.”

\textsuperscript{120} Peisner, “Music as Torture: War Is Loud,” 7.

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.
statement verified that young soldiers were motivated by heavy metal and carried this music to battle.

According to CIA operatives, the angry sounds of American metal and rap were “so foreign” to the captives that “it made them frantic.”122 This was their introduction to Western music. Regarding hardcore metal music, one operator revealed that the prisoners “don’t want to hear that stuff, they think it’s Satanic.”123 Rap was equally offensive, as songs like Eminem’s “Slim Shady” would “combine rage, misogyny and vivid sexual imagery” to defeat the prisoners through “all that they might find loathsome about the culture of ‘the infidel.’”124 Additionally, this music “forced the torturees to ‘vibrate’ to the sounds of their enemy,” which was destructive to their psyche.125

A member of U.S. Psy Ops stationed in Iraq admitted that torture music was chosen based on its cultural offensiveness, as this helped to break a prisoner’s resistance.126 This method was especially effective on Islamic fundamentalists, who are strictly prohibited from secular music and singing.127 Forcing a Muslim to sin by listening to music is a “cultural insult.”128 When a new group of prisoners arrived at Gitmo, Psy Ops played Neil Diamond’s “Coming to America” over the speakers to “keep the

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123 Pieslak, “Cranking up the Volume,” 7.
124 Cusick, “Music as Torture/Music as Weapon,” 11.
125 Koester, “Suzanne Cusick Asserts ‘Acoustical Violence.’”
126 BBC, “Sesame Street Breaks Iraqi POWs.”
128 Rapp, “Pain of Listening.”
prisoners agitated” and prevent communication, leading to “an unmitigated disaster” which was nearly “an all-out riot.”\textsuperscript{129} The “bad Muslim” theme was popular with interrogators who intended to “exploit Muslim cultural taboos and guilt involved with enjoying music on certain ascetic holy days.”\textsuperscript{130} Certain songs, such as Deicide’s “Fuck your God,” exacerbated the religious shame of the prisoners.\textsuperscript{131}

To intensify this shame, the interrogators added another category, the sexually provocative songs. The sexually explicit lyrics of Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera were the soundtrack to other sexually humiliating techniques such as “prolonged strip searches,” enforced nudity, and “invasion of space by a female.”\textsuperscript{132} Cusick observed a blogger who mocked this idea as absurd, denying that “loud music and sexually suggestive gestures from attractive women could become ‘torture,’ when people not under interrogation pay substantial cover charges and tip heavily for the same experience.”\textsuperscript{133} While this is a correct assessment for some cultures, the blogger disregarded the cultural differences between the U.S. and certain countries where women must be fully covered and are subject to stoning for sexual sins. Another blogger recognized the potential for additional harm when combining sexual music and torture.

Referring to the Red Hot Chili Peppers song, “What I got I got to get it put it in you,” he

\textsuperscript{129} Friedman, “The Use of Music in Psychological Operations.”

\textsuperscript{130} Barnes, “11 Popular Songs the CIA Used to Torture.”

\textsuperscript{131} Kennaway, “Music and the War on the Nerves.”

\textsuperscript{132} Gallagher, “Six Songs Used to Torture.”

\textsuperscript{133} Cusick, “Music as Torture/Music as Weapon,” 8.
claimed, “Particularly if played in a camp run entirely by homosexuals with an enormous sign over the gate saying ‘The Gayest Place on Earth,’ I’d break before lunch.”\footnote{134}{Ibid., 9.}

The final category, according to Gupta, is the music that expressed Western dominance, which matches two of Kagen’s categories, the nationalistic and sentimental songs. Philosopher Slavoj Zizek called this nationalistic music an “initiation into American culture, an attempt to browbeat and terrify foreign captives with the signs of American victory.”\footnote{135}{Kennaway, “Music and the War on the Nerves.”} The “Star Spangled Banner” and “Coming to America” are obvious picks when you want to remind your captive of his hopelessness while magnifying the glory of your own nation. Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the USA” is a curious choice, however, since it criticizes America and its involvement in Vietnam.\footnote{136}{Gallagher, “Six Songs Used to Torture.”} I assume this is a common oversight, since President Ronald Reagan adopted the song for his 1984 campaign with the misunderstanding that it was a “message of hope.”\footnote{137}{Parker Molloy, “Are Politicians Too Dumb to Understand the Lyrics to ‘Born in the USA?’” Daily Beast, https://www.thedailybeast.com/are-politicians-too-dumb-to-understand-the-lyrics-to-born-in-the-usa (accessed March 1, 2021).}

Another song that is sometimes mistaken as patriotic is “American Pie,” which falls into Kagen’s sentimental category because it “invokes nostalgia for a lost past…in a kind of requiem for a nation that’s strayed from its God.”\footnote{138}{Kagen, “Controlling Sound,” 7.} She calls this “a particularly American kind of abuse: aggressive exertion of cultural hegemony mixed with physical
force, ostensible compliance with the ‘good guy’ rules, and nostalgia for the lost American dream.”\textsuperscript{139}

Morag Grant contended that torture music is not necessarily aggressive or violent based on its structure or lyrical content. She argued, “Particular abstract structural qualities,” such as those in metal and rap, are not as pertinent as “what the music represents in the framework of the conflict in question.”\textsuperscript{140} This suggests that playing “Born in the USA” to American prisoners during the Vietnam War (if it had been recorded yet) would be equally aggressive to playing “Coming to America” to Iraqi prisoners, who possibly thought America was coming to take over their country.

Therefore, the context of a song is as important as its genre in cases of music torture. The most offensive aspects of the music according to many Muslim prisoners were its “Western culture” and its “infidel” creators.\textsuperscript{141} Those prisoners who were never exposed to Western music before were the ones who suffered most. Tom Barnes concluded, “They received the most horrifying introduction imaginable.”\textsuperscript{142} Regarding the CIA’s torture program at Guantánamo Bay, John Hamilton summarized,

\begin{quote}
The sexual explicitness of Christina Aguillera, the demonic chromaticism of Metallica, the blatant force of hardcore rap, all ostensibly provided the ideal means for obliterating one world and imposing another…. The music conjures a scene that is inevitably disorienting and deranging, dissolving a detainee’s subjective will, revealing to the victim that the ground upon which he stands has dematerialized into sounds controlled by another, that he is now subject to a world in which he does not belong, that he is now at the mercy of a world where the cessation of pain may be promised, but only on the condition that he divulge information on suspected terrorists, that he alert authorities to future threats. The
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{140} Grant, “Pathways to Music Torture,” 15.

\textsuperscript{141} Cusick, “Music as Torture/Music as Weapon,” 4.

\textsuperscript{142} Barnes, “11 Popular Songs the CIA Used to Torture.”
torment will end, in other words, only on the condition that the tortured prisoner begins to sing.\textsuperscript{143}

A plethora of articles and papers analyzed the use of specific songs, genres, and cultural tropes. We tend to focus on the things we can understand, and most people have experience with a piece or style of music they find morally or aurally objectionable. There is no question that music directly connects to our emotions, and we can imagine how hearing certain lyrics during a particularly difficult time would affect us more intensely, but in the case of the American music torture program, music’s function was “sheer sound,” rendering the emotional and cultural substance irrelevant.\textsuperscript{144} PsyOps spokesman Ben Abel verified, “It’s not the music so much as the sound. It’s like throwing a smoke bomb. The aim is to disorient and confuse the enemy to gain a tactical advantage.”\textsuperscript{145} Ahmed corroborated, “After a while you don’t hear the lyrics, all you hear is heavy, heavy banging, that’s all you hear. Um, you can’t concentrate on the drums, or what the person’s saying, all you hear is just loud shouting, loud banging, like metal clashing against metal. That’s all it sounds like. It doesn’t sound like music at all.”\textsuperscript{146}

Remarkably, musicians seemed to comprehend this distinction while their non-musical counterparts continued to look for meaning in certain lyrics. Jonathan Salem resolved, “Sound and its characteristic frequencies and amplitudes matter more than content.”\textsuperscript{147} Martin Cloonan wrote, “The precise music was immaterial. Any music, from

\textsuperscript{143} Hamilton, “The Bull of Phalaris.”

\textsuperscript{144} Cusick, “Musicology, Torture, Repair,” 3.

\textsuperscript{145} DeGregory, “Iraq’n’ Roll.”

\textsuperscript{146} Cusick, “Musicology, Torture, Repair,” 5.

\textsuperscript{147} Salem, “Death Fugue.”
Beethoven to The Beatles, can be used violently, to create what the victims repeatedly spoke of as ‘torture.’”¹⁴⁸ David Gray asserted, “That is nothing but torture. It doesn’t matter what the music is. It could be Tchaikovsky’s finest or it could be Barney the Dinosaur. It really doesn’t matter, it’s going to drive you completely nuts.”¹⁴⁹ The general consensus among musicians and torturers is that once music reaches a certain volume, it ceases to function as music, suggesting that the CIA’s program was more “noise torture” than “music torture.”

Music Torture in Vietnamese POW Camps

Ollie commented, ‘Had we read of our prisoners getting treated in this way (e. g., our POW’s in Vietnam) we would have been outraged.’ The fact is, if our POW’s in Vietnam had been treated like the terrorists in Gitmo, it would have been far better than how our POW’s in Vietnam were actually treated. There is no comparison…. This is a far cry from the worst treatment at Gitmo, which seems to consist of dripping water, variable air conditioning, and loud pop music.

– Different River Blog¹⁵⁰

The previous chapter outlined the gruesome physical torture suffered by the American prisoners in Vietnam. With the literal threat of death hanging over them for years, the POWs knew that corporeal damage was their most imminent danger. If the prisoners in Gitmo had feared for their lives, I believe an entirely different story would have surfaced. Instead, the greatest risk they faced was psychological, which explains why their reports focused on music torture. Anyone looking for sympathy will lead with their most critical pain. The Vietnam POWs likewise recounted their most horrifying experiences first and most often. Every news report at their release mentioned the rope

¹⁴⁸ Cloonan, “Bad Vibrations.

¹⁴⁹ Campbell, “Musicians Condemn Use of their Songs.”

trick, but the extended stays in solitary confinement and cuffs and the beatings that permanently crippled or killed were often left out, as they lacked the same shock value. In the midst of such revelations, talk of music torture might have seemed ludicrous, like a child whining because the radio is too loud while his friend writhed in agony next to him.

Despite the emphasis on physical torture, most POWs eventually wrote or spoke about the effect of music on their time in prison. An official music torture program may or may not have existed in those prison camps. Music clearly was not the main method of extracting information, but it was absolutely used to control and cause pain. However, unlike at Gitmo, the music in Vietnam actually functioned as music instead of a wall of indistinguishable sound. Songs and genres were chosen based on the desired outcome, whether it be breaking morale, punishment, or attempts at indoctrination.

Volume was not the primary catalyst of music torture in the POW camps, mainly because the technology was unavailable. Joe Crecca recalled, “The speakers in our cells were 500 ohm jobs. They were such crap speakers even Radio Shack wouldn’t sell them.”151 While Crecca never experienced “dangerously high volume or ear blasting,” Charlie Plumb reported that “frequently the ‘squawk box’ was way too loud.”152 Stuart Rochester inferred, “Repetitive and incessant, the loudspeaker barrage was made all the harsher by poor fidelity, ear-splitting amplification, and no way to control the volume or program selection.”153 Tom Norris griped, “The radios in the camps and the speakers in

151 Joe Crecca, e-mail message to author, September 19, 2015.
152 Charles Plumb, e-mail message to author, February 25, 2016.
our rooms were of such poor quality as to be mostly useless.”¹⁵⁴ Several men reported that the records or tapes were off speed.¹⁵⁵ One POW described the result as “an old, scratchy record which you didn’t particularly like (even though you’ve memorized most of the words) being played for you at a party which you didn’t really want to attend.”¹⁵⁶

Recollections of the loudspeakers fill the POW memoirs. Franklin Hartsell noted, “Several spoke of an irritating loudspeaker with blaring Vietnamese music and propaganda which suddenly became inoperable after prayers had been offered that God ‘please get that radio off the air.’”¹⁵⁷ Robbie Risner wrote in detail about his encounter with the loudspeaker:

The next morning, right after five o’clock, the gong went off, and the music started playing…. I was amazed that I was not hungrier or thirstier. I thought, “I can starve to death and it is not going to bother me.” No food, water, toilet privileges, exercise or sunlight – it probably would not take long. The thing that was bothering me most, though, had nothing to do with food or water. It was the radio speaker right outside my window. It was driving me out of my mind with its loud singsong music over and over. I was already in a pretty sad mental state and the fact that I was locked down, could not move around or exercise was tough. But that radio playing was pure torture. It played all day Sunday.

In desperation I began to pray about it. I said, “Lord, you have just got to get that radio off the air or else I am going to be a screaming ninny in a little while.” This was the third day, and I really prayed. I became ecstatic that evening when the speaker quit working. The guards came out and beat on it and rattled it around. Every time they hit it and it still did not work, I would say, “Thank you, Lord.”

¹⁵⁴ Tom Norris, e-mail message to author, September 6, 2015.


never did come back on as long as I was in stocks. I could hear the static but that was all. What a blessed relief.  

The United Nations Committee Against Torture concluded that the “sounding of loud music for prolonged periods” constitutes torture. But how loud is too loud? The exact decibel level of the speakers in Vietnam cannot be determined, but Rob Doremus measured them at “two decibels above the threshold of pain.” Cecil Brunson estimated that they were around eighty decibels, or “at least twice as loud as I needed them to be.” To put this in perspective, the CIA detention facilities could not exceed 79 decibels (the volume of a vacuum cleaner), and yet prisoners suffered permanent psychological damage.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration determined that constant noise of up to 82 decibels will not cause hearing loss, but sensitivity to volume and reaction to music varies by the individual. This figure also fails to factor in the effects of captivity which lower resistance to external stimuli. Morag Grant warned, “The use of music to torture should never be viewed as the lesser of many potential evils simply

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158 Robinson Risner, *The Passing of the Night: My Seven Years as a Prisoner of the North Vietnamese* (Duncanville, TX: World Wide Printing, 1999), 74-76.


163 Ibid.
because not all survivors give it the same weight.”164 Under the right circumstances, 79
decibels is “precisely loud enough to break a man.”165

If the Vietnamese were not purposely triggering sensory overload, there is another
explanation for their use of excessive volume. Glendon Perkins recalled that he endured
deafening music “only when they were torturing prisoners to drown out the screams.”166

Ralph Galati also remembered the noise as a signal:

When they were torturing guys in the camps at times, sometimes they would get
the music and turn it up really loud. In New Guy Village and Heartbreak, we
think there was a pig pen. They obviously kept pigs. And sometimes they would
agitiate the pigs to get them squealing and oinking to kinda muffle the sounds of
the guys that were going through torture. So I remember that noise, and I
remember the sound sometimes when the loudspeakers would get really loud, and
sometimes they were doing it just to muffle the sounds of what was going on
elsewhere in the camp. You kinda knew when they did it because it was extra
loud and extra long. That’s probably the only stuff you knew when that came on
that something bad was happening.167

The sounds of torture were problematic in the Hanoi Hilton, which stood in the
middle of the city. The Vietnamese renovated their torture rooms with large knobs of
stucco jutting out of the wall to soundproof the screams of the tortured men.168 The
outlying camps did not have acoustic dampeners. Everett Alvarez was next door to Ed
Davis at the Briarpatch during a week-long torture session. He lamented, “It was pitiful
listening to his torment. The dividing wall did little to dull the sound of his deafening

164 Grant, “Pathways to Music Torture,” 3.
166 Glendon Perkins, e-mail message to author, February 26, 2016.
167 Ralph Galati, telephone interview by author, September 5, 2014.
168 Malcolm McConnell, Into the Mouth of the Cat: The Story of Lance Sijan, Hero of Vietnam
(New York: W. W. Norton, 1985), 194.
cries.”\textsuperscript{169} In Alcatraz, the guard deliberately opened the shutters so the other prisoners could hear their leader’s screams of anguish.\textsuperscript{170} Jerry Singleton revealed the agony those sounds could cause. “The hardest time that I had in North Vietnam and obviously this is an emotional thing to me, was listening to the screams of other American prisoners while they were being tortured. And being locked in a cell myself sometimes uh, in handcuffs or tied up and not able to do anything about it.”\textsuperscript{171} If the Vietnamese were using loud music to mask the sounds of torture, could it be called an act of compassion? What we now define as music torture could have been little more than a concealment effort.

For American POWs, volume was not their chief concern; the most prevalent complaints focused on musical style and content. The music played for the prisoners fits into three categories: Vietnamese music, anti-war music, and sentimental music. The first two categories almost universally bothered the men, but the third often backfired and boosted morale.

Most of the men I interviewed were, at the very least, irritated by Vietnamese music. Many of them are still emotionally affected by the mere thought of those sounds, and several claimed that physical torture was more humane than the torture that music produced. Bob Shumaker proclaimed, “God awful stuff! They’d play it daily. Sounded


like a bunch of garbage cans banging together.”

Quincy Collins affirmed, “It sounded like a bunch of dishes being thrown down the stairs.” Charlie Plumb vividly expressed his distaste:

Nearly all Vietnamese music was a strain on my nerves. The first time I heard it I was reminded of a basement full of grade school horn-blowers trying to imitate the cry of a panther. And then the wailing would stop, but the respite was not long enough to relieve my headache. Surely, I thought, no composer would dare write this down! He dared. I heard the same sounds over and over, originating from sheet music that showed the same key signatures and music symbols we have in America. How a single sheet of paper could be the source of so much caterwaul I still don’t know.

In addition to the high volume and lack of control over their environment, the POWs were bombarded by a sound they had never heard before, and their minds could not sort out the new configurations. A study at McGill University discovered that the brain releases dopamine “in anticipation of a subject’s favorite part of the song,” implying that “music fuels your brain’s innate desire to detect patterns and solve problems.”

Just as “any Western music would have done the trick” for the Gitmo detainees, Vietnamese music consisted of tonal structures that the Americans could not predict. Don Spoon concluded, “This may be the root cause of my irritation at the Vietnamese music… not being able to make sense of it!” Jim Sehorn confirmed, “Most of the music that we heard was Vietnamese propaganda which we really didn’t

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172 Bob Shumaker, e-mail message to author, August 27, 2015.
174 Plumb, I’m No Hero, 113-14.
175 Friedman, “The Use of Music in Psychological Operations.”
176 Ibid.
177 Donald Spoon, e-mail message to author, September 6, 2015.
understand anyway and if anything it just made me angry.” Sehorn admitted that he found the occasional classical music “more enjoyable not because he recognized or truly appreciated the sophistication of the composition, but that he enjoyed the familiar style and structure of Western Hemisphere music.”

As seen in Gitmo, the prisoners with no previous exposure to a culturally foreign sound will struggle when forcibly inundated with that music. Conversely, those who are already familiar with the music prior to capture are less likely to suffer. Of all the POWs I interviewed and researched, only two men fell into this category. After hearing so many adamant complaints, I was surprised to find someone who appreciated the Vietnamese music. Dick Francis said, “I found it soothing – both the American and Vietnamese music.” Shocked by his answer, I continued, “As you are the first person who claimed to find the Vietnamese music soothing, I must know more. Are you referring to vocal or instrumental music? Had you heard this kind of music before? What about it did you like? I am intrigued!” He replied, “I don’t know if I am the first to claim the music was soothing. I had been stationed previously in Japan and always liked the soothing and peaceful sound of the oriental wind instruments.”

I found one other POW who praised the music of Vietnam. Mo Baker said, “I remember hearing an instrumental of a musician playing a one-string guitar with orchestral accompaniment. The artist was fantastic considering he had only one string.” Hoping to find a pattern, I asked Baker if he had experience with that style

178 Jim Sehorn, e-mail message to author, September 12, 2015.
179 Ibid.
180 Dick Francis, e-mail message to author, August 31, 2015.
181 Mo Baker, e-mail message to author, September 16, 2015.
before his captivity. He replied, “I enjoy the very strange music and singing style that I witnessed in Bangkok before I was captured.”\textsuperscript{182} As I suspected, exposure to Asian music prior to captivity, when the listener has control over his environment and chooses to listen, seems to make that music more palatable, if not pleasurable, when heard in detention. Awareness of this trend could have a great impact on soldiers and education programs. SERE school would be more effective if the music used in training exercises was chosen based on its cultural relevance rather than its annoyance factor.

Rap and heavy metal were an obvious choice for the Gitmo prisoners, with an aggressive, driving beat and a bass line that rattles internal organs, but what is it about Vietnamese music that agitates Americans? Jim Stockdale, Jr. explained that most of their music is “tinny,” “in a very high treble range. There was never any bass, except for percussion.”\textsuperscript{183} Don Spoon noted that the vocal music had a “harsh, irritating quality” that would keep him awake.\textsuperscript{184} Mo Baker appreciated the “sweet voices of the oriental girl” but disliked the drum accompaniment, “an odd bongo that had a leather drum head on each end, with one end about eight inches in diameter and the other only four inches in diameter which caused the drum to swallow the sound rather than resonate.”\textsuperscript{185} He transcribed the rhythm as “Chinga ching ching Thong, ching Thong ching Thong, Chinga ching ching Thong, ching Thong ching ching ching.”

\textsuperscript{182} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{183} James B. Stockdale, Jr., telephone interview with author, September 3, 2015.

\textsuperscript{184} Spoon, e-mail.

\textsuperscript{185} Baker, e-mail.
Loud, shrill, abrasive voices in an unknown language over an inconsistent cadence and drowning in static—this certainly sounds like torture. However, the most frequent grievance from the POWs was the “Asian” or “oriental” style. Some of those with musical experience described the sound as “discordant to the Western ear.” Shumaker guessed correctly “that their musical scale is quite different than ours.” And indeed, the principles behind Vietnamese music can be baffling even to educated Western ears. Their scales range from two to seven pitches, depending on geographical location, but commonly rely on the pentatonic scale (C-D-E-G-A). Their pentatonic scale cannot be played on a piano, though, because their pitches are not equivalent to Western pitches. They also vary within the same song, so a pitch notated as E can be E flat, E natural, or anything in between.

These pitch deviations show the connection between Vietnamese music and their tonal language. With “six tones placed within equal, high, and low levels,” a word can have multiple different meanings based on “vocalic diacritical marks” which direct the inflection of speech. For example, “ba” has several potential pronunciations, each creating a unique word. Saying “ba” with a flat tone means “father” or “three,” at a mid-range tone and inflecting upward means “governor,” while “bà,” beginning on the same

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186 Michael Brazelton, e-mail message to author, August 27, 2015.

187 Shumaker, e-mail.


190 Nguyen, “Taste of Vietnamese Music.”
pitch then falling means “grandmother.” These vocal inflections are intoned in music using quarter and halftones as embellishment, and the ornamentations carry over to instrumental music. The mode determines which notes receive vibrato, a necessary component which influences the choice of instruments.

Only those instruments with vibrato and the ability to alter pitch can perform traditional Vietnamese music. Modern instruments are modified to allow for “greater flexibility in pitch-bending,” but conventional instruments of ancient Vietnamese origin are still the most popular. Baker recalled castanets, tambourines, and multi-stringed instruments. Collins remembered hearing a flute, zither, and one-string instrument. He commented, “But that’s their culture. It’s back to instruments of the beginning period. I guess there are some other countries that are just as bad.”

The most hated aspect of Vietnamese music among the POWs was the two-thousand-year-old one-string instrument, the đàn bầu (see fig. 12.1). Peter Schoeffel defined it as “a one stringed guitar with a sliding scale of notes. The nearest thing we have is the musical saw. Our quite apt but vulgar description I will not repeat to you.” After some prodding, he added, “It was some disgusting part of a disgusting animal’s anatomy, stretched across a pig’s ass, and plucked with the teeth.” Dick Stratton called it “atonal,” “terrible,” and “like listening to fingernails down a blackboard.” Ted

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192 Baker, e-mail.
193 Collins, interview.
194 Peter Schoeffel, e-mail message to author, September 2, 2015.
195 Dick Stratton, e-mail message to author, August 28, 2015.
Ballard wrote “I could visualize an old man, bent with many Oriental years, strumming the “One String.” Twang is a good word. Stretch it out———twaaannng. Further. Twaaaaaaannnnnnnnr~nggggggggg. Vibrate it. My word processor cannot handle vibrations.”

![Image of a man playing a zither](https://globalquiz.org/pl/ilustracja-pytania/wietnamski-instrument-dan-bau-1/)


On Sundays, the speakers would often “blare a serenade” of music played on the đàn bầu. Ray Alcorn said the sound “made one want to bury ones head under a pillow, if only we had had a pillow.” He recalled that after several hours, “a loud retort could be heard echoing through the prison, ‘Turn that f#*%king thing off.’” Gene Smith labeled the instrument “the most god-awful sound in the world!” After leaving solitary, Smith

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197 Ray Alcorn, e-mail to author, August 30, 2015.
spent 24 hours next to an office blasting the đàn bầu on the radio. He remembered, “It grated on my nerves so bad, I said, ‘They are torturing me! Surely they’re gonna let me out of here before I lose my mind.’” After two months completely alone, it took only one day of music torture to break him.

Ironically, the most effective torture might not have been intentional. When I asked if the guards knew how much the prisoners despised the music, Alcorn replied, “The Vietnamese truly felt the đàn bầu made beautiful sounds. They could not comprehend that it was repulsive to us. I believe they felt they were doing something nice for us.” Joe Crecca agreed, “I do not believe they thought they were torturing us. But, for sure, they were torturing me. I think that kind of music if you could call it that could cause brain damage.” Morag Grant anticipated this hypothetical paradox. She wrote, “Music torture is perhaps unique amongst tortures in that it potentially brings benefits to the torturer simultaneously with pain and suffering for the prisoner.”

Whether the serenade was an act of kindness or cruelty, or simply what the guards listened to on their radios, the music had a lasting effect on many of the POWs. Alcorn proclaimed, “Hearing it today certainly brings back memories of that F#*ing speaker box.” After pondering whether music had a negative effect on him in prison, he added, “As I left Vietnam, I attempted to leave with no remorse or hatred in my heart. As I write this, I realize I was not totally successful. I hate the đàn bầu!!”

198 Gene Smith, telephone interview with author, August 28, 2015.
199 Alcorn, e-mail.
200 Crecca, e-mail.
202 Alcorn, e-mail.
Peter Schoeffel also doubted that his captors were playing their music out of malice, suggesting that the Vietnamese had “the intention of making us feel a sense of solidarity with them.” His evidence for this conclusion came from a series of broadcasts of “young children being taught VN songs,” in which the teacher sang a phrase “which would then be sung by the screechy most unpleasant sounding group of perhaps second graders ever to assault the ears.” The teacher sang the next phrase, and “the rugrats would go through both phrases. Then another, ad (seemingly) infinitum.” These songs were performed in Vietnamese, and the prisoners never received a translation. Since music in another language rarely inspires solidarity, I asked Schoeffel if he would recognize those songs today. He replied, “No more than I would recognize the yawp of a monkey.”

Again, the motivation behind Vietnam’s song choices is unknown, but it is hard to ignore the irritation of untrained children singing. In fact, twelve POWs used some form of the word “irritation” when describing the music. Plumb said, “I found the sing-song oriental music irritating. And I still do today.” Spoon emphasized that the singing of children from sunset until late in the night was “VERY irritating” to him. Other prisoners were more passionate with their descriptions. Jay Hess explained, “My definition of hell is a bad tooth ache combined with Vietnamese music.”

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203 Schoeffel, e-mail.
204 Ibid.
205 Ibid.
206 Plumb, e-mail.
207 Spoon, e-mail.
208 Jay Hess, e-mail message to author, September 11, 2015.
commented, “Never was able to understand or appreciate Vietnamese traditional music. I found it painful to listen to.”²⁰⁹ Pete Camerota referred to the music as “VN TRASH.”²¹⁰

The đàn bàu and the singing children were most likely to cause physical reactions in the prisoners. Ralph Galati declared, “If I hear pure Vietnamese music, that screechy, squeaky stuff, I wouldn’t last long. I didn’t tolerate it then, I won’t tolerate it now. Nauseating is a very good term. I don’t consider what they have music.”²¹¹ He described the music as “excruciating.” Spike Nasmyth recounted his roommate’s breakdown after a session of music torture:

Some gook decided to do us a favor. Over the speaker we heard, “The criminals will be allowed to hear Vietnamese children sing.”
This was nothing new; every once in a while they would play thirty minutes or so of the little darlings singing patriotic songs. Well, some kids sort of sing, but North Vietnamese kids screech the most awful off-tune noise you’ve ever heard. “How long they been singing, Spike?”
“Must be forty-five minutes or so. God, it’s bad.”
“Sounds like a bunch of alley cats in a gunnysack.”
Dogs are starting to howl.
“How long now, Spike?”
“Over an hour.”
“I love kids, but I’d choke those little bastards if it would shut them up.”
Screech, squawk, screech, screech . . .
Jim has his blanket around his head, but the howls, yowls, and screeching get through.
“Oh, man, oh, Jesus, how long?”
“Must be at least three hours.”
“Please, Spike, kill me, I can’t take it.”
“Hang in there, Jim.”
When it stopped, Jim was shaking and he was a sickly shade of green.
“I’d take the ropes anytime.”²¹²

²⁰⁹ Stratton, e-mail.
²¹⁰ Pete Camerota, e-mail message to author, August 27, 2015.
²¹¹ Galati, interview.
Physical and emotional reactions to Vietnamese music were both common and severe. While the volume was likely as high as that used in Gitmo, this was not the most aggravating factor. A combination of low-quality recordings and speakers provided static and distortion which could be annoying. An emphasis on treble voices and clanging instruments meant the sound was shrill and unpleasant. Lyrics in an unknown language kept the prisoners from connecting with the music. These factors alone would equate to music torture, but they would not inspire such hatred.

In my opinion, the reason the American POWs found the Vietnamese music so irritating and painful was the variations in pitch. Western music uses consistent tuning, allowing the ear to predict all probable notes in a song based on the key. Borrowed notes, ornaments, and modulations are still contained within the twelve tones expected by the listener. If a musician is off-key, the listener will recognize the microtonal differences and find them repulsive.

A person with perfect pitch will be especially vulnerable to these slight variations. Jossuk explained on the IMSLP forum:

If one’s “perfect” A equals 440 Hertz, then exposure to variations (higher or lower) will cause distress sufficient to negate any previous advantage. Such variations can be historical (Baroque tunings), regional (local traditions of tunings higher or lower than 440), and situational (a cappella choral performances where the pitch drops during a piece).213

Many bloggers who proclaimed themselves to have perfect pitch claimed that off-key music caused them physical pain and illness. Charliecompany34 wrote, “What we

expect to hear is not heard at that precise moment and we can do nothing but cringe."**214**

Headaches and nausea seem to plague those gifted with perfect pitch, with some likening it to torture. Bruce Chidester noted, “Few can understand the pain one goes through when listening to a program such as “America’s Got Talent” or performing with an average church choir. Being forced to listen to out of tune pitches rate in the same category as water boarding and root canals.”**215**

Bill Butler (creator of the human piano in Room 3) and a few other POWs had perfect pitch, so they might have found Vietnamese music particularly torturous, but when dealing with music based on different scales and constantly embellished with quartertones, even the untrained ear will notice something is off. The brain will attempt to decipher patterns and predict the direction of the song, but it will lack the ability to do so. The barrage of complex stimuli seems chaotic, creating anxiety which can lead to headaches.

Science has not determined the relation between out-of-tune music and physical reactions, but I theorize that the fight-or-flight response is somehow related. If this response is triggered by loud noises, it follows that unfamiliar sounds could also indicate possible dangers. On the other hand, our culture could have embedded musical laws so deeply in our brains as children that our neural pathways cannot accept an interval (or instrument or genre) which does not fit into that blueprint. This could explain why every generation thinks the next generation’s top hits are not music. For the POWs, the


cacophony they heard on the radio was not music; it was noise. However, the next chapter will show that even familiar music can be used as torture.
Chapter Thirteen

Music and Propaganda

When I was moved into the same area as other American POWs the audio circuit was tailored more for American tastes and featured music in English played by “Hanoi Hannah” during propaganda broadcasts. These broadcasts featured “news” about the exploits of the People’s Army in the South, American and South Vietnamese units “wipe out” and lists of American “Air Pirates” (Pilots) “shot down” over N. Vietnam.

– Don Spoon, Email

Propaganda has always been a part of life in a communist country. Every morning and evening, broadcasts reach every corner of the nation with a calculated message permeating each news report and song. Nearly one million loudspeakers blanket the countryside of Vietnam, symbolizing “the Communist Party’s continuing efforts to control the flow of information in Vietnam through a dogged attachment to the idea that the media is, first and foremost, a vehicle for state propaganda” (see fig. 13.1). These “monstrous loudspeakers” can be found in the most remote, destitute villages with no water, sewage, or electricity “except for a single strand of wire strung around bushes and branches and bamboo poles leading to a shining multi-kilowatt speaker often as large as eight feet in diameter.” Reuters reported, “The loudspeakers conjure an Orwellian image of omnipotent presence of the state in the one-party Southeast Asian country.”

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1 Donald Spoon, e-mail message to author, September 6, 2015.


The Voice of Vietnam made its first broadcast through those loudspeakers in September of 1945, when Ho Chi Minh declared the nation’s independence from France.\(^5\) As a reminder of their struggle for autonomy, the broadcast always opens with the song “Smashing Fascism.”\(^6\) During the war, the speakers offered news, propaganda, and airstrike warnings, but now the “monotonous daily broadcasts” combine patriotic music and “mundane announcements.”\(^7\) The Party continues to disseminate propaganda praising

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\(^5\) Mares, “Vietnam Propaganda Is Not a Dirty Word.”

\(^6\) Ibid.

\(^7\) Ibid.
itself, but throughout the 1960s and 70s, the messages focused on vilifying America.

These common themes were reiterated in every broadcast:

The Americans are evil aggressors who willingly trample underfoot the sacred rights of the Vietnamese people; the present Thieu-Ky regime and its army are satellites of the Americans; the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (commonly called the NLF) is the champion of the “just cause;” and the Peoples Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF) never lose.8

The POWs were not immune from these broadcasts, as an English version was provided just for them and the soldiers in the field, luring them in with a sampling of pop and rock and roll. This method of psychological warfare was not new to the Vietnam War, though. During WWII, Tokyo Rose and Axis Sally interspersed American jazz music with discouraging messages and the Germans parodied English-language songs with disheartening words.9 In Vietnam, Hanoi Hannah ruled the airwaves, and the prisoners could not escape from her voice.

Food and water were often luxuries in the POW camps, but propaganda remained “the basic communist necessity.”10 The first priority in every detention center was wiring the speakers, so if a camp had no power, generators were set up and radios were connected.11 Charlie Plumb recalled a guard climbing on the roof to wire a speaker while the prisoners suffered from hunger and thirst. He wrote, “This was a typical example of the V enthusiasm to feed our minds.”12 Sam Johnson was dismayed to see speaker wires

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10 Plumb, I’m No Hero, 132.

11 Ibid., 129.

12 Ibid., 132.
upon his return to the Hanoi Hilton because “he’d escaped the Zoo but not Hanoi Hannah.”13 Listening to her program was not optional, so if a prisoner appeared inattentive, a guard would bang his rifle on the door or on the prisoner.14

The Voice of Vietnam broadcasted Hanoi Hannah two to four times a day for a half hour each, and additional propaganda programs filled the air for the rest of the day. Early in the war, the radio played for twelve hours a day, but the broadcasts in prison varied depending on the guard controlling the radio. Later captures moaned about enduring five hours of broadcasts, while others dreaded the two airings of Hannah’s short program.15 Sunday was Hannah’s day off, but the POWs were not relieved because the speakers rattled with the singing children discussed earlier.16

The Voice of Vietnam was an “extremely loud,” “very poor imitation of Voice of America” with such low fidelity that listeners strained to interpret the “pidgin” English.17 Programs were shrewdly crafted by the Ministry of Propaganda to entice the young American men fighting in South Vietnam and those languishing in prisons in the North.18 Hanoi Hannah was the main attraction, “using a tone of voice she thought was sexy.”19

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14 Sam Johnson and Jan Winebrenner, Captive Warriors: A Vietnam POW’s Story (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1992), 98.


16 Townley, Defiant, 145.

17 Plumb, I’m No Hero, 129.

18 Ibid., 129.

19 Ibid., 131.
and hip American slang she did not fully understand. She rarely made sense and spoke with a “certain awkwardness,” and “the best thing going for her was that she was female and had a nice soft voice.”

For some POWs, any distraction, especially one with a female voice, was welcome. John McCain recalled, “She’s a marvelous entertainer. I’m surprised she didn’t get to Hollywood.” Dick Francis explained, “The propaganda was so grossly exaggerated that it was actually entertaining.” By offering hot scoops on sports and celebrities and playing rock songs banned on the U.S. Armed Forces Radio, she kept the soldiers’ attention through the disinformation segments.

For other POWs, listening to Hanoi Hannah was tantamount to treason, leading to occasional arguments. Plumb wrote, “Some of our guys became very upset about the speakers. They didn’t listen, and they didn’t want any other POW to listen. They thought it would poison our minds.” Don North cautioned that although she called herself Thu Houng (the fragrance of autumn), “her job was to chill and frighten, not to charm and seduce.”

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23 Dick Francis, e-mail message to author, August 31, 2015.


25 Plumb, I’m No Hero, 132.

26 North, “The Search for Hanoi Hannah.”
Many prisoners found that Hannah’s messages disclosed valuable information. Rob Doremus noted, “Even the propaganda was helpful as we read between the lines.” Ray Alcorn agreed, “At times the barrage of propaganda became most annoying. We were able, however, to pick up little bits of information of what the war situation really was.” Plumb admitted, “Initially I too was deeply concerned about the V’s attempt to brainwash me, but those concerns were soon dispelled. The radio broadcasts were so ludicrous that they provided many laughs. However, included in their absurdities were subtle indicators, enabling us to detect the turn of Vietnamese war morale. The propaganda messages sometimes inadvertently shared intelligence that had been withheld from the prisoners. The letter of a deceased soldier included, “We don’t have to ask Neil Armstrong what the craters of the moon looked like; we can see them in the bomb craters of Viet Nam.” This was the POWs’ first indication that man had landed on the moon and they “jumped for joy” at the news.

Finally, most of the prisoners had times when Hannah’s “half hour of witless propaganda” paralyzed them with fear or crushed their spirits. If her reports were even remotely accurate, then their homeland was overrun with anti-war, anti-military protests. Everett Alvarez said, “Propaganda, the constant propaganda that we were fed about the American people against the U.S. government’s policies, it sorta affects you in a way.

27 Robert B. Doremus, e-mail message to author, September 3, 2015.

28 Ray Alcorn, e-mail to author, August 30, 2015.

29 Plumb, I’m No Hero, 133.


31 McCain, Faith of my Fathers, 217.
That’s why I was surprised to see this enthusiastic, emotional welcome home."^32 The prisoners worried about going home and whether their country would still accept them,^33 but they also wondered if they would ever make it home alive. When Radio Hanoi reported that their people had been executed and they planned to retaliate, the POWs speculated, “Who are they going to execute besides American prisoners of war if they want to retaliate against the United States?”^34

The propagandist content of the Voice of Vietnam programming is critical to this study because the messages disseminated through the POW camp loudspeakers, in both spoken and musical form, were instruments of cultural imposition, mind control, and aural torture. The lies and disinformation which flooded the airwaves were “heavy rounds fired with cunning and precision in a deadly serious propaganda war.”^35 The songs reiterated the same themes heard in Hanoi Hannah’s news reports: praising Vietnam, condemning their enemies, advancing the anti-war agenda in the U.S., convincing the soldiers to surrender out of fear or homesickness, and boasting of the humane and lenient treatment of the POWs.

The Vietnamese knew they could not win the war based on military strength alone, so they focused their energies on winning people’s minds. A Viet Cong document captured by the U.S. outlined the significance of their programs:

> Our resolution depends fundamentally on the consciousness of individual interest, class interest, people interest and the resentment of the people, who are

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^35 Flammer, “Communist Propaganda in South Vietnam.”
determined to stand up and fight the enemy. Without wide and deep propaganda action, it is impossible to make the masses become conscious of the above interests and indignant, and turn their indignation into a powerful strength to defeat the enemy.\textsuperscript{36}

Because radio was the main source of this propaganda, citizens of Vietnam were “absolutely forbidden to listen to the radio broadcasting stations of the Free World” because “the information of the opposite side was untrue and the musical program was corrupted.”\textsuperscript{37} Regardless of this regulation, most VC troops preferred Radio Saigon and the Voice of America for their accuracy.\textsuperscript{38} The American POWs did not have this option.

On the Voice of Vietnam, Hanoi Hannah’s purpose was to “re-educate” Americans about the war.\textsuperscript{39} A 1966 article reported, “Hannah’s shows are invariably the same. After the news is an editorial denouncing U.S. escalation of the war. Then a recording by an Asian soprano who sounds as if she’s having her ears pierced.”\textsuperscript{40} Tales of “the glorious victories of the Vietnamese military and the shame of America”\textsuperscript{41} were “presented with the expected bias.”\textsuperscript{42}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
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\bibitem{40} Tom Tiede, “‘Hanoi Hannah’ Talks to GIs,” \textit{Playground Daily News} (Fort Walton Beach, FL), 6 January 6, 1966.
\bibitem{41} Heslop, \textit{From the Shadow of Death}, 57.
\bibitem{42} Townley, \textit{Defiant}, 201.
\end{thebibliography}
The prisoners of war agreed they could never trust information they received from what they called the “Shit Box.” They often used the same language to describe Hanoi Hannah’s reports. Lee Ellis called them “communist half-truths and outright lies.” Ken Cordier said they were “all distortions and outright lies.” Sam Johnson lamented, “Our guards told us nothing. Hanoi Hannah told us nothing but lies.” Joe Crecca heard “all lies about how many airplanes they shot down (always exaggerated).” Many POWs complained of the constant exaggerations, with headlines like “twenty thousand American troops wiped out by one guerrilla company.” Eugene McDaniel recalled,

At one point they said America had lost more than four million men. Since there were hardly a total of three million in uniform in the entire services around the world, it was obviously absurd. It was even laughable. Only I didn’t laugh. It grated on me, even unnerved me.

Hand a thesaurus to someone with rudimentary skill in a language, and you end up with a typical Hanoi Hannah report: “The number of enemy soldiers killed so far this month, according to incomplete figures, is 314,226. The sovereign nation of Viet Nam will acquire the ultimate victory over perfidious aggressors and obdurate fascist-

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43 Joe Crecca, e-mail message to author, September 19, 2015.
46 Johnson, *Captive Warriors*, 98.
47 Crecca, e-mail.
48 Plumb, *I’m No Hero*, 129.
Throughout the twenty-one-year conflict, a maximum of 250,000 South Vietnamese soldiers and about 58,300 American soldiers died, making Hannah’s monthly figures preposterous.

When Vietnam was caught in a lie, the propaganda machine worked overtime to convince the populace to believe the Party over their own eyes. A prominent example is the martyrdom of Nguyen Van Be, a Viet Cong guerilla who supposedly sacrificed himself to avoid capture by smashing a mine against a tank, killing sixty-nine enemy soldiers. He was lauded in songs, poems, books, broadcasts, and an original opera, all urging his countrymen to “emulate the fallen hero.” A problem arose when Be showed up in a prison camp, very much alive and willing to work with the U.S. and South Vietnamese governments, which seized the opportunity to prove that the enemy had “brazenly lied,” “strike at the communists, embarrass them, and destroy their credibility.”

Millions of Vietnamese wholeheartedly believed the story of Be’s heroism. As Herbert Friedman explains, “Such belief becomes a fulcrum of the revolution’s fighting spirit. To suddenly discover that the fulcrum has no base on which to stand, that the hours and months of concentrated study and hero worship were for naught, represents far too great a danger to the system.” With the U.S. dropping millions of leaflets and producing movies and television programs debunking the myth, Vietnam needed to act quickly.

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50 Plumb, *I’m No Hero*, 130.


52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.
They accused the U.S. of medically “changing facial traits” of an actor,\textsuperscript{54} decrying the alleged hoax in the following radio broadcast:

During the last few days, the psychological warfare organs of the Americans and their lackeys in Saigon employed every propaganda trick to invent a story of the appearance of hero Nguyen Van Be in their prison before they released the news that Nguyen Van Be had been arrested and is living safe in their claws, without being tortured. Then the Thieu-Ky clique’s psychological warfare minister held a press conference during which a Nguyen Van Be appeared before journalists who questioned him. This cheap psychological warfare trick of the Americans and lackeys cannot convince anyone, including the Western correspondents.\textsuperscript{55}

Be’s family and friends were warned that claiming Be was alive was a death sentence, and the NLF followed through on that threat. One of Be’s neighbors admitted, “[The people] know he is still alive, but they are forced to close their mouths, they cannot say anything, they have eyes and ears but they are like deaf and dumb, they look but they can’t see anything.”\textsuperscript{56} Hanoi continued to publish articles and songs celebrating Be’s heroic actions, so the U.S. published a song offering “The Truth about Nguyen Van Be” (see fig. 13.2). A Hanoi newspaper responded,

The propagandists of the puppet regime begin to sing in a whining female voice…It would appear that the enemy’s psywar specialists have a surplus of American milk and flour which they use to feed a number of call girls…When their mouths are itching to speak they sing a few songs which are completely out of tune and with a voice full of narcotics which might belong to a prostitute…And then their wailing, maudlin voice goes on like this: “Dear friends, that fellow Nguyen Van Be you celebrate as a hero is still alive!”\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{56} Friedman, “Strange Case.”

\textsuperscript{57} “The Rach Gam Area and our Hero Nguyen Van Be,” Van Nghe, May 1967.
The two points I gather from this article are that the U.S. must have hit a nerve to warrant such a graphic and malicious critique, and the Vietnamese find our musical scale equally offensive to the ear. The American POWs would not have heard this particular song in prison, but they surely heard some of the songs praising Be, which were repeated every year on the anniversary of his “death.”

![Image of song sheet](http://www.psywarrior.com/BeNguyen.html)


Pro-Vietnamese propaganda was a major focus of the Voice of Vietnam broadcasts, and the music often represented their militaristic ideals. The POWs were
bombarded by songs with combative names and a “very militant sound.”58 Jim Sehorn and Tom Norris both recalled an excess of martial music during the Tet Offensive, including the Viet Cong “national anthem.”59 They heard the song so often that Quincy Collins was able to sing it more than fifty years later. He said, “They played it a lot. It was irritating, but some of it stuck.”60 He explained, “Everything was created for a nationalistic purpose. It wasn’t to express love and emotion, one person to another, ever, ever. It would be a song like ‘My Country ‘Tis of Thee.’ The melody flow was not soothing. It was not even agreeable.”61

Songs which encouraged the Vietnamese to fight were regularly played to the prisoners, solidifying the superiority of their captors. Michael Brazelton remembered “songs in the Asian style and very discordant to the Western ear with titles like ‘The Mountains and the Valleys Rise up Against the American Imperialists.’”62 Charlie Plumb recalled Hanoi Hannah dedicating songs to the “valiant fighters” of a specific army unit or a factory which increased production, with titles like “Shoot Straight at the Aggressors” and “Pull Out His Liver.” (Apparently extracting an enemy’s liver was a “cannibalistic ritual” practiced by starving guerilla fighters.)63

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58 Jim Sehorn, e-mail message to author, September 12, 2015.

59 Tom Norris, e-mail message to author, September 6, 2015.

60 J. Quincy Collins, interview by author, Charlotte, NC, February 4, 2016.

61 Ibid.

62 Michael Brazelton, e-mail message to author, August 27, 2015.

63 Plumb, I’m No Hero, 131.
A Radio Hanoi tirade on song parodies gives insight into the music the station preferred. The announcers condemned the “flagrant and despicable” act of stealing songs “while openly confessing themselves to be shameless thieves without the least compunction whatsoever.”\textsuperscript{64} They offer the example of “Ready! Open Fire!” which was heard frequently on the Voice of Vietnam Radio in the North. They were shocked to hear a “Saigon-based megaphone” broadcasting the song “with completely counterfeit words” in the South: “My hand falls from the trigger, my heart melts. Those troops, they are my brothers. How could we kill one another?” The new lyrics called for love and compassion, which angered the announcers:

Our song, broadcast by the Voice of Vietnam, aims at stirring up the revolutionary heroism of our people, encouraging one and all to hold their heads high and zero in their gun-sights on the enemy, and open fire. The parody, i.e. the version pirated and altered by the Saigon-based megaphone, is aimed at fomenting defeatist sentiment and appeals to our people to drop their guns and surrender to the enemy. That dirty trick of stealing and altering other people’s brainchildren will assuredly fail to achieve the end they sought.\textsuperscript{65}

Ironically, modifying traditional songs with revolutionary content was a common practice in the North as well. Lyrics celebrating ancient heroes were replaced with those venerating Ho Chi Minh.\textsuperscript{66} Nevertheless, the objective of the radio station is clear. The songs must incite valor and rage and must never encourage compromise or surrender. The American POWs would know they hold no power or hope in the hands of such strong-willed and single-minded resolve.


\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.

Ho Chi Minh determined the path of the Vietnamese people and directed their propaganda efforts. He selected “Tiến Quân Ca” as his national anthem which includes the line, “The path to glory passes over the bodies of our foes.”67 He knew how to motivate his people, and they revered him for his leadership. The prison guards worked tirelessly to convert the POWs to his philosophy. William Burroughs recalled, “They wanted us to denounce our leaders. They wanted us to denounce capitalism. They wanted us to praise Ho Chi Minh. They wanted us to praise the communist initiative.”68 Jay Hess was bewildered by the similarities between his Mormon faith and their devotion to their leader. “They did things so much like the Church that it scared me. They have their kids sing about Ho Chi Minh; we teach our children to sing about Joseph Smith. They sing about their armies; we sing ‘Hope of Israel, Zion’s army.’”69

The loudspeakers frequently played songs of praise for Ho Chi Minh, but on September 2, 1969, the prisoners noticed a shift. James Mulligan wrote, “Suddenly I heard the strains of a new song I had never heard before. It was some sort of a ballad, quite melodious, and centered its theme on Ho Chi Minh. I’ll bet he’s dead, I thought. They played the same song over and over again.”70 Quincy Collins concurred, “We could hear, we knew right quick when Ho Chi Minh died.”71 According to Gobel James, this

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69 Heslop, From the Shadow of Death, 145.


71 Collins, interview.
day was especially torturous. “After Ho Chi Minh died, listening to them repeatedly play songs praising him became very irritating and nauseating.”

For Jim Stockdale, however, it was the one day that he did not hate the speakers. While recovering from wounds in total isolation, he heard remarkable music unlike anything he had experienced in all his years in prison. He reminisced, “It was more orchestral than it was tinny, very moving and solemn, a medley of dirge. It was intricate, and it was well-woven together, and there would be two themes weaving through the music almost at the same time.” He remembered reading that Communist Totalitarian countries “bank culture that the state owns and keeps for special occasions, special music and special performances and so forth, so that when the big day comes they’ve got something in the safe deposit box.” Stockdale told his son that he suspected a French influence, which could explain why some of the American prisoners appreciated the sound. The complaints about that day seem to center on the subject matter instead of the musical style.

Anti-US, Anti-War

Accusing the US and its Allies of committing aggression against Vietnam, the Communists emphasize the just nature of their resistance. Regardless of the success of their ground operations in the South or their antiaircraft operations in the North, they boast of overwhelming victories. A very prevalent theme which has emerged since active US participation in the war is that of “war crimes.”

– VC Propaganda Factbook

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72 Gobel James, e-mail message to author, February 26, 2016.

73 James B. Stockdale, Jr., telephone interview with author, September 3, 2015.

74 Ibid.

75 Combined Intelligence Center, VC Propaganda Factbook, 25.
In addition to praising Ho Chi Minh and encouraging tenacity in its people, Vietnam employed international propaganda to condemn the U.S. and emphasize the “atrocities” of its troops. By vilifying American soldiers, the Vietnamese hoped to reduce public support for the war and discourage enemy combatants. Hanoi Hannah read excerpts from American magazines and newspapers highlighting the anti-war protests in the U.S. “to remind the troops of how unpopular the war was back home.” She explained, “We thought if we used the American magazines, it would be more convincing.”

The Voice of Vietnam had two main audiences, GIs and POWs. Certain sections of the broadcast were directed at each of these groups. Her typical closing segment was a “sympathetic and sisterly” plea for surrender, invoking the spirit of self-preservation. She asked, “GIs, why should you die ten thousand miles from home? Lay down your arms now and cross over to the people’s side.” She demanded, “American GIs, don’t fight this unjust immoral and illegal war of Johnson’s. Get out of Vietnam now and alive.”

Addressing “American boys,” she warned, “Why should you keep fighting for a losing cause? This war is bad for the United States. It would be better for them if they had never involved themselves. It is an exercise in disaster.”

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76 Ibid., 25.
78 Ellis, Leading with Honor, 22.
79 North, “The Search for Hanoi Hannah.”
80 Johnson, Captive Warriors, 98.
In case these entreaties did not have the desired effect, Hannah played on the soldiers’ fear and emotions. She admitted, “We wanted to make them a little bit sad.” She specifically looked for reports on “high casualties,” and listed off the names of Americans who were recently captured or killed. Over a violin dirge she said, “And now, for those who died—but not for their fatherland,” followed by the names and hometowns of the lost. The POWs listened intently, dreading the day they would hear a name they recognized.

If the fear of death did not convince the audience to concede, then Hannah would appeal to their sense of decency, reminding them that the war was immoral and unjust. The POWs were dismayed by Americans like Tom Hayden and Jane Fonda “spouting words that could have been written for them in Moscow and Hanoi,” including accusations that the “POWs were war criminals and their reports of torture were lies.” Hannah later proclaimed, “We broadcast tapes sent to us from Americans against the war. These were most effective I believe. Americans are xenophobic, they will believe their own people rather than the adversary, even a friendly enemy voice.” As the antiwar activists willingly repeated statements the POWs had been tortured into making, “the baffled prisoners wondered what had gone wrong at home.”

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81 Shenon, “Hanoi Hannah Looks Back.”
82 North, “The Search for Hanoi Hannah.”
83 Plumb, *I’m No Hero*, 132.
85 North, “The Search for Hanoi Hannah.”
86 Townley, *Defiant*, 145.
These goons just blindly took the side of the opposition, similar to what the traitorous Jane Fonda did by going over there and directly comforting the enemy. I didn’t need the hassle of being told that my future and my treatment and my life depended on whether I too, like Jane Fonda, cooperated to bring about a just end to this dirty illegal war of aggression being waged against the heroic people of Vietnam by the perfidious, obdurate and bellicose Government of the United States.  

Veterans of the Vietnam War maintain a special level of ire for Jane Fonda, the movie star who donned the gear of a Vietnamese soldier, posed on their anti-aircraft artillery, and broadcast multiple times on the Voice of Vietnam condemning American POWs, who were tortured until agreeing to meet with her (see fig. 13.3).  

Larry Guarino was horrified by the tape of her singing “Fuck the Army.” He recalled, “We sat there in shock, trying to adjust to the harsh realization that these were our own American women!” When Fred Cherry heard Fonda’s voice on the radio alleging that American pilots bombed women and children at night out of cowardice while he suffered an “extended torture siege, he became so enraged that he tried to tear [his] irons from the walls.”  

Tom Hanton got so frustrated with Fonda’s rhetoric that he “shimmied up” a twenty-foot wall to rip out the speaker wires.  

The loathing that some vets developed for Fonda was so intense that it left them in emotional bondage. Chuck Dean claimed that one Marine was physically afflicted by this anger. Paralyzed from the waist down by a

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87 Larry Friese, e-mail message to author, September 24, 2014.  
fifty-caliber round, the soldier supposedly forgave Fonda and stood from his wheelchair after two decades without walking. Whether this miracle happened or not, the story illustrates the effect the words of Fonda and others had on the prisoners who were forced to listen to what they considered torture.


Fonda was one of “a diverse lot of perverse activists” who visited Hanoi and conveyed “how well the American U.S. POWs were being treated” after seeing only “a handful of specially selected prisoners.” Journalist Nick Thimmesch demanded a public apology from this “collection of duped Americans” who served Hanoi’s cause, prolonged

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the war, and caused the prisoners additional pain.\textsuperscript{93} The motivations behind these visits varied and, despite some “poor judgment and naïveté,” many of them had good intentions.\textsuperscript{94} The Committee of Liaison with Families of American Servicemen Detained in North Vietnam delivered mail from the prisoners to their families and apparently brought a guitar during one visit (see fig. 13.4), but they never questioned why they could only see one prison camp.\textsuperscript{95} The Vietnamese had converted the mayor’s compound into a show camp to impress these visitors.\textsuperscript{96} David Hoffman confirmed that all visitors saw “one specific camp, and one specific group of people, very carefully controlled. I know. I was in it.”\textsuperscript{97}

![Figure 13.4. Committee of Liaison with Families of American Servicemen Detained in North Vietnam Visiting with POWs in 1970. Source: Tom Cunningham, “Hanoi Visitor Says POWs Are Well,” \textit{Daily Californian} (Berkeley), February 24, 1971.](image)


\textsuperscript{94} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{95} Tom Cunningham, “Hanoi Visitor Says POWs Are Well,” \textit{Daily Californian} (Berkeley), February 24, 1971.


\textsuperscript{97} Stephen Rowan, \textit{They Wouldn’t Let Us Die: The Prisoners of War Tell Their Story} (Middle Village, NY: Jonathan David Publishers, 1973), 76.
Another prominent activist whose voice regularly played on the prison loudspeakers made the journey to Vietnam. Folk singer Joan Baez joined the Committee for Solidarity with the American People in a visit to Hanoi in 1972 (see fig. 13.5). Her timing was unfortunate, as she arrived on the first day of the Christmas Bombings. Before dawn on December 19, bombs fell outside out of the Zoo, destroying many cellblocks. Once the POWs were recovered from the wreckage, they were moved to different areas of the prison compound. Cecil Brunson was surprised to hear Joan Baez sing nearby the next day. Tom Hanton was invited to meet with her, and he seemed surprised by the visit as well. He wrote to his wife, “They were very instantaneous and unexpected. The minister read a Christmas passage. We said the ‘Our Father,’ then Joan Baez sang a song.” She had planned to sing the “Lord’s Prayer,” but the dozen prisoners she met requested to hear “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down” instead. Since the Son Tay raid in 1970, the Zoo had become the show camp, so the Peace Committee, the anti-war prisoners who cooperated with the Vietnamese, were housed there. These men always met with Hanoi’s visitors, and their song choice is evidence of their anti-war ideology.


The rest of the Zoo’s residents passed along the tapped message, “JOAN BAEZ SUCCS,” spelled as such because the tap code omitted the letter K.  

Hanoi Hannah constantly reported on the public’s increasing antiwar sentiment, telling her audience that the “United States is suffering disastrous defeat, and that the American people couldn’t care less.” The Evening Tribune recognized this fact after the war, reporting that “one of Hanoi’s greatest sources of power was the notion and impression that the vast majority of American people were against the war and wanted the United States to, ‘pull out immediately — thus leaving Vietnam to the Communists.’” Alvarez told how the guards showed the prisoners movies of the riots and anti-war demonstrations and “how the American people are supportive of the peace

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103 Stockstill, “Inside the Prisons of Hanoi.”

104 Thimmesch, “A Public Apology Is Needed.”
loving people and against the neocolonialist policies of the U.S. imperialists, war-loving mongers.”

John Sexton recalled, “Sometimes you would get the feeling inside you that the whole United States was against the war—that the American people didn’t want you over there and even that Americans hated you for being there.”

Following the reports of vigils and moratoriums across the U.S., Hannah played the latest rock and roll hits, enforcing the anti-war message. The soundtrack of the Vietnam War was highly controlled and manipulated by Vietnamese propaganda. American activists often wrote their songs based on the disinformation campaigns, which would further anger protestors who believed the American soldiers were committing heinous acts. As the protests grew in popularity, musicians catered to the new trend and put out more anti-war music which guaranteed a devoted and passionate audience. These songs would then be featured on Radio Hanoi, becoming the theme songs of the disenfranchised draftees and tormenting the POWs. Larry Friese observed,

“The V,” i.e., the Camp Authorities, tried to brainwash us and sucker us over to their side of the political, or ideological, side of the argument that was going on. They did this by playing anti-war songs that were obviously popular among the anti-war goons doing their thing in the United States—performers like Peter Seeger, Bill Fredrick, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan…, probably more—the “counter culture” goons that got sweet-talked into getting their attention by protesting rather than studying the problem their country was embarked upon and supporting the effort.

To ensure that American soldiers tuned in, Hannah would play songs that were banned on U.S. Armed Forces Radio, like Eric Burdon’s “We Gotta Get Out of this

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105 Stories of Service, “On Two Fronts.”

106 House Committee on Foreign Affairs, American Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia, Hearings before the House Subcommittee on National Security Policy and Scientific Developments, 92nd Cong., 2nd sess., February 3, 1972, 144.

107 Friese, e-mail.
The Voice of Vietnam bought music directly from the “progressive Americans who came to visit Hanoi,” so every song had a clear anti-war message. The records were not always popular stateside, and I could find no evidence of some songs that were engrained in the POWs’ heads. Mo Baker noted, “They played ‘Every Day the Movement’s Getting Stronger’ a thousand times. We got sick of it.” Gene Smith recalled hearing “The Viet Cong blew our base up with our own dynamite, they drove it right up to the main gate of [unreadable] Bay at high noon, in our truck, with our dynamite, and a picture of Hubert Humphrey smiling on it.” Neither of these songs earned a spot in the many catalogs of Vietnam protest music, nor a single search result on Google. Low quality recordings from unknown artists were aggravating, but they did not inspire confidence in the strength of the anti-war movement.

The POWs struggled to believe the news that protestors back home were marching on the Capitol, and they rejected the words of the activists on the radio, but when their favorite musicians put out songs supporting the movement, their denial could not withstand the evidence. They were dismayed when they heard John Lennon sing “Give Peace a Chance” and learned the song was topping the charts. Mo Baker said, “I was irritated when they played Americans singing anti-war songs. I later found out that back home the airways were saturated with them.” For a full list of songs used as torture in the Vietnam prison camps, see Appendix E.

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108 North, “The Search for Hanoi Hannah.”

109 Ibid.

110 Mo Baker, e-mail message to author, September 16, 2015.

111 Gene Smith, telephone interview with author, August 28, 2015.

112 Baker, e-mail.
Certain songs affected the POWs more than others, with the most difficult to hear being the emotional, melodramatic propaganda and the lyrics targeting soldiers. Ralph Galati recalled, “Pete Seeger was the guy that I found on the more disgusting side. That was the stuff they were just trying to play to feed their cause. (Always propaganda.) You had to keep your mind straight, and separate the fact from fantasy and not let it debilitate you too much. Easier said than done.”\textsuperscript{113} Seeger’s songs include “We Shall Overcome,” “Where Have All the Flowers Gone,” and “Waist Deep in the Big Muddy.” The first two are poignant ballads recorded by several activist artists. “Big Muddy” is a metaphorical folk song which was banned from American television in 1967 for its obvious criticism of President Johnson as a “big fool.”\textsuperscript{114}

Bill Frederick was a singer-songwriter with little notoriety outside of the Hanoi Hilton, but his words impacted the POWs greatly. His album \textit{Hey, Hey... LBJ! Songs of the U.S. Anti-War Movement}, included two songs that the prisoners could never forget. The title song was based off the famous protest chant, “Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?” The lyrics seemed to validate the propaganda/rumors that American pilots purposely targeted women and children. “LBJ works night and day, each target’s his decision. He bombs friendly villagers with surgical precision.”\textsuperscript{115} These accusations allowed the Vietnamese to call for war trials against the prisoners early in the war. The

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\textsuperscript{113} Ralph Galati, telephone interview by author, September 5, 2014.
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\textsuperscript{115} Bill Frederick, \textit{Hey, Hey... LBJ! Songs of the U.S. Anti-War Movement}, Vinyl Masters, CD, 1967.
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prisoners did not take the threats of execution lightly, and this song was a reminder of their fears.

Another song by Bill Frederick ignited a controversy about the purpose of the United States’ involvement in Vietnam. “And Freedom, Too” claimed that the U.S. was fighting for wealth and natural resources with no regard of the lives lost:

We’re fighting wars on poverty  
Throughout the world today.  
We’re killing off poor people  
In a most efficient way.  
We can’t lose Southeast Asia  
So we’ll bomb it ‘til it’s bare.  
And then I’ll start a tungsten mine  
And become a millionaire.\textsuperscript{116}

The chorus repeated a long list of valuable materials found in Vietnam, stating that America fights for them… and freedom, too. For men who had lost everything fighting for a cause they believed in, this implication was deeply hurtful. Larry Friese could not hold back the anger as he remembered it fifty years later. He wrote, “The anti-war goons who espoused that we were there for ‘coal and zinc and manganese, lumber, fruits, and rice…’ were nothing more in my mind than brainwashed puppets who had swallowed the anti-war line like a bunch of great big thick-headed mullets.”\textsuperscript{117} Being tortured by music that expresses the dominance of your enemy is hard enough, but when your own countrymen belittle your nation, your principles, and your sacrifices, the betrayal adds another layer of psychological violence.

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{117} Friese, e-mail.
On the other hand, some of the anti-war songs were so ridiculous that the prisoners learned to appreciate their comedic relief. Joe Crecca recalled, “They’d play anti-war songs which at first got me angry. But after a while I started to laugh at them. I can even remember many of the lines and music from those songs as silly as they were; e.g., “I’m only eighteen, I’ve got a ruptured spleen and I always carry a purse….“\textsuperscript{118} When explaining that “there were some funny songs written that were anti-war,” Gene Smith also referenced the “Draft Dodger Rag” of Phil Ochs. (The line about carrying a purse stuck out to both of them.) Smith noted, “We just enjoyed the music, tuned it out, and laughed and said, ‘Those idiots.’”\textsuperscript{119} The anti-war song that elicited the most laughter, though, was not anti-war at all. Michael Benge remembered that one POW had convinced the Camp Authority that the Beatles’ song, “Hard Day’s Night,” was a “great anti-war song in the U.S.” When the prisoners heard Hannah introduce the song in this way, they “sat back and roared.”\textsuperscript{120}

**Playing with Emotions**

Music can amount to torture, and lyrics can be the vehicle of human rights abuses. – United Nations Convention Against Torture\textsuperscript{121}

Anti-war propaganda attacked the prisoners’ communally-held ideals, prompting the men to fortify their commitment to their nation and their duty as a group, but when propaganda assaulted them on a personal level, they were left to deal with it alone.

\textsuperscript{118} Crecca, e-mail.

\textsuperscript{119} Smith, interview.


\textsuperscript{121} United Nations, “Convention Against Torture,” 10.
Emotional distress can effectively break a person’s will, and the Vietnamese used music to play with the POWs’ emotions. Hanoi Hannah played two American songs at the end of her broadcasts as part of her goal to “demoralize” the enemy soldiers. The POWs were often treated to additional music from home chosen by the camp guards to exacerbate the fear and homesickness already plaguing the captives. Frank Anton wrote, “The radio also played quite a few songs popular at the time in America, and that was when I became aware that our captors were trying subtly to break down any will to resist. I couldn’t have selected sadder songs, given our circumstances, if I had tried to.”

When we are in control of our surroundings and circumstances, these songs might have little effect on our emotions, but they exploited the fears shared by many POWs: their wives leaving, their country changing, their bodies deteriorating. They lived in dread of their next torture session and wondered if they would ever leave the prison alive. When the radio programmer found a song with particularly pertinent lyrics, he would let it repeat ad nauseam. Gobel James remembered Ella Fitzgerald’s “Don’t Fence Me In” playing “many, many, many times.” Jeremiah Denton recalled the Camp Authority continuously playing “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes” to remind the pilots of their fiery shootdowns. As “O Holy Night” played repeatedly, Sam Johnson “tried to block out

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124 James, e-mail.

the perverse picture that came to [his] mind: beaten and bloody prisoners falling on their knees, trussed up with wet hemp rope, with bamboo poles shoved between their legs.”

In addition to making the prisoners relive their current and recent traumas, the Vietnamese fomented doubts of their wives’ faithfulness. Anton continued, “They appealed to longing for home and to that mournful feeling of love going bad, as with ‘Make Believe You Love Me One More Time’ – all those sentiments that, for a prisoner of war half a world away, eat away at his mind and heart. That was the music that Hanoi Hannah wanted us to hear, and it was painful.” Songs like Connie Francis’s “I Almost Lost my Mind” tormented the men who had already received a “Dear John” letter or suspected one was coming.

Many songs focused on a cheating partner. Ray Alcorn remembered Simon and Garfunkel’s “Cecilia” upset him. When the singer leaves Cecilia in the bedroom to go wash his face, he returns to find someone has taken his place. Alcorn quipped, “Don’t think Cecilia was a keeper,” but he had been shocked by the changes back home and the words the teenagers were hearing on the radio. The song played most often and mentioned by the most POWs was Nancy Sinatra’s “These Boots Were Made for Walking.” At first, some of the younger guys enjoyed it, rushing to write down the words as it played. After a couple of hours, however, “the response was often the same as for

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126 Johnson, Captive Warriors, 166.
128 North, “The Search for Hanoi Hannah.”
129 Alcorn, e-mail.
130 Doremus, e-mail.
the dan bao.” Larry Friese included this on his list of “psycho songs” that made him “want to be outta there and have my freedom.”

Homesickness was one of the hardest issues the POWs faced daily, and the Vietnamese capitalized on this paralyzing emotion. For men who had already wasted years in those tiny cells, the sentimental songs were among the cruelest treatment they received. Larry Friese never forgot how brutal this sappy music could be:

They (“the V,” i.e., the Camp Authorities) browbeat us with songs that to this day I’d like to know who did the picking. Repeatedly they played songs that they knew would make us sad that we were sitting on our duffs in a jail cell while our lives passed by day after day, month after month, year after year. Nancy Sinatra’s “Time, oh Time, Where Did You Go?” and “White Summer Wine,” Frank Sinatra’s “The Town I Live In” and “There Used to Be a Ballpark Right Here,” more…, all cleverly picked to make it hurt to sit there ad infinitum. I was 25 when I got shot down and 31 when I got out—good years—I was sad enough just being locked up.

PSYOP teams often employ music to “create nostalgia in the adversary soldier’s mind,” and they have learned that “female voices may increase these effects.” Perhaps the soldier is reminded of a nurturing mother or doting wife who would seek to end his suffering. Vietnam certainly exploited the prisoners’ loneliness by playing “love songs by sexy ladies.” Female covers of songs that were originally by male artists frequently played on the radio. Don Spoon recalled hearing “If You’re Going to San Francisco” sung by “an oriental group” with “poor English skills.”

131 Alcorn, e-mail.
132 Friese, e-mail.
133 Ibid.
134 Friedman, “The Use of Music in Psychological Operations.”
135 Plumb, e-mail.
136 Spoon, e-mail.
One song on Friese’s list of “psycho songs” played in Vietnam stands out as exceptionally spiteful. “Green, Green Grass of Home” was recorded by a long list of male singers—Tom Jones, Porter Wagoner, Johnny Darrell, Bobby Bare, Jerry Lee Lewis, Dean Martin, Johnny Cash, and Elvis Presley—but the Vietnamese chose Joan Baez’s version.\textsuperscript{137} The lyrics celebrate a perfect homecoming, complete with parents and old loves running to meet the train. Vivid descriptions of the town and people make it easy for the listener to visualize the idyllic scene. I can imagine the POWs closing their eyes as they listened, imagining the joy of their own reunions. However, the last stanza takes a dark turn:

\begin{quote}
Then I awake and look around me
At four grey walls that surround me
And I realize, yes, I was only dreaming
For there’s a guard and there’s a sad, old padre.\textsuperscript{138}
\end{quote}

The singer is in prison awaiting execution, so he will never experience his glorious reunion. He will never again touch the “green, green grass of home.” This song almost sounds like propaganda written specifically for the POWs, putting all of their fears to music.

Several POWs expressed that the American songs they heard on the Voice of Vietnam made them homesick. Quincy Collins explained, “When the Gooks played an American tune that was especially dear to me, I wanted to be back home. So it was a matter of homesickness that transpired with that. Something very familiar that you didn’t


expect to hear in that situation.”139 I asked if he thought they did this on purpose and he replied, “Could be. I wouldn’t put it past them.”140 Charlie Plumb believed the devastating song choices were deliberate. “They tried to demoralize us with songs like, ‘Have I Been Away Too Long?’ I think that was by Tex Ritter. At Christmas time, they played, ‘I’ll be home for Christmas …. if only in my dreams.’”141

Interestingly, despite the music being louder in Hanoi than Guantánamo Bay, the prisoners were much more affected by the words and meanings of the songs than the volume. Natasha Lin proposed, “Not only is music used to acoustically infiltrate the physical being of the body as a form of sound, it is the choice of music that manifests the mental pain within the victim.”142 Since each individual has different reactions based on their memories, tastes, and associations, music is a volatile form of torture with a great potential to backfire. While “Green, Green Grass of Home” tormented Larry Friese, it was a favorite of Dick Stratton, who remembered it as a song “about a girl” with “hair of gold and lips of cherry” that his cellmate Bill Spencer sang beautifully.143 Perhaps Spencer never sang the final stanza, or Stratton focused on the segment that stood out to him. Either way, the song clearly did not have the desired effect for every prisoner.

The prisoners quickly ascertained the goal of the sentimental music, and they considered it a victory when they withstood the onslaught and sometimes even benefited.

139 Collins, interview.

140 Ibid.

141 Plumb, e-mail.


143 Dick Stratton, e-mail message to author, August 28, 2015.
Howard Rutledge wrote, “‘Radio Stateside’ may have been a tool to break us down, but the snatches of American music…backfired and really boosted my spirits.”\textsuperscript{144} He likened hearing Christmas carols on Hanoi Hannah to “discovering hidden treasure.”\textsuperscript{145} Peter Schoeffel added, “The Vietnamese would play American records. I believe they thought we would become discouraged when hearing them. The opposite was true. Frank Sinatra’s ‘The House I Live In,’ for example, could stir only strong feelings of love over our unique country.”\textsuperscript{146} Jim Sehorn remembered hearing Johnny and June Carter Cash singing “Jackson.” He noted, “It always struck me as being rather curious why the V ever selected that song and those two. It didn’t seem to be too consistent with their underlying purpose to demoralize and harass.”\textsuperscript{147}

Some prisoners said their most positive memories of Vietnam were delivered by Hannah. Fred Purrington recalled, “Best uplift I had was being surprised when Sinatra’s version of ‘Strangers in the Night’ came through the speaker of my cell. Although the gooks attempted to demoralize us through the Voice of Vietnam over radio or as we called it the Bull Shit Box, to the contrary, it was the most humane thing they ever gave us. A touch of home, I call it.”\textsuperscript{148} Charlie Plumb wrote that one of his “biggest thrills” came unexpectedly on a freezing cold day when he and his cellmate huddled under thin blankets with their teeth chattering. “All of a sudden we heard Ray Charles singing

\textsuperscript{144} Howard Rutledge and Phyllis Rutledge, \textit{In the Presence of Mine Enemies} (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1973), 40.

\textsuperscript{145} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{146} Peter Schoeffel, e-mail message to author, September 2, 2015.

\textsuperscript{147} Sehorn, e-mail.

\textsuperscript{148} Fred Purrington, e-mail message to author, August 29, 2015.
'What’d I Say?’ Both of us jumped up as though we had been resurrected from the dead, shed our blankets, and started twisting.”\textsuperscript{149}

The prisoners’ reactions were not always so dramatic, but many found that the music offered them support. Robert Doremus said, “I was really happy to hear music from home.”\textsuperscript{150} Walter Eckes claimed, “It boosted morale.”\textsuperscript{151} Ron Byrne considered the music “a pleasant break in the routine.”\textsuperscript{152} Paul Schulz said it would “lift the spirits,” and Jay Hess noted, “It was a treat.”\textsuperscript{153} Charlie Plumb said, “It was always good to hear anything that reminded me of home and the good life.”\textsuperscript{154} When the Vietnamese played Frank Sinatra’s “What Is America to Me,” Jerry Coffee was certain “they had no idea the inspirational effect upon the POWs.”\textsuperscript{155}

Contrary to the argument made by Suzanne Cusick and others in the previous chapter, a few POWs asserted that music was their method of dissociation. Glendon Perkins stated, “Music removes you from the moment to another place. For a few moments you forget you are in prison.”\textsuperscript{156} The difference here seems to be that the POWs were carried away by music they knew beforehand or connected to deeply. Joe Crecca had always loved classical music, so pieces like “The Eroica,” Dvořák’s Violin Concerto,

\begin{itemize}
  \item Plumb, *I’m No Hero*, 133.
  \item Doremus, e-mail.
  \item Walter Eckes, telephone interview with author, September 4, 2015.
  \item Ron Byrne, e-mail message to author, October 23, 2015.
  \item Paul Schulz, e-mail message to author, September 6, 2015; Hess, e-mail.
  \item Plumb, e-mail.
  \item Jerry Coffee, e-mail message to author, September 4, 2015.
  \item Glendon Perkins, e-mail message to author, February 26, 2016.
\end{itemize}
and “Pictures at an Exhibition” were his “transportation out of the prison world. It was a temporary emotional escape. Familiar sounds and styles provided comfort and security, whereas the unfamiliar Vietnamese music led to agony. Sentimental, nostalgic songs might have induced feelings of homesickness, but they also allowed the prisoners to revisit the past and feel at home where they were.

Considering their positive reactions to this music, I am not surprised that the prisoners have no long-term effects related to sentimental songs they heard in Vietnam. In fact, none of them claimed to have any emotional response to sentimental songs after their release. Ray Alcorn stated, “It’s nice to hear those American songs today and remember a few pleasant times in a very somber atmosphere.” Jim Sehorn echoed, “I don’t get the same strong emotional reaction, but I am always reminded of the days and years when they did.” Several POWs shared that they had met, called, or written to the artist of a song that helped them in prison and thanked them.

If the music intended as torture can put a smile on the captive’s face, its effectiveness should be questioned. Even the anti-war music had nominal success. The POWs were disgusted by the message of the songs, but often enjoyed the songs themselves. Very few prisoners felt any anger when hearing these songs years later (although many would still boil at the mention of Jane Fonda). American music seemed to hold little value as a source of music torture.

157 Crecca, e-mail.
158 Alcorn, e-mail.
159 Sehorn, e-mail.
The Gitmo detainees suffered from PTSD after their music torture, but I have found scant evidence of this phenomenon in the prisoners of Vietnam. The only music that could still elicit an emotional response years after release was the Vietnamese music, enforcing my hypothesis that hearing music from a diverse culture, language, and tonal pattern while under duress is the epitome of music torture. Robert Certain wrote,

Sounds also bring back some of the old fear in Hanoi. Fireworks on the Fourth of July or other holidays are nice to look at, but the explosions have to be endured. Twenty-one gun salutes challenge my decorum at military funerals for the same reason. Sudden loud noises trigger an excess startle reflex. Oriental music brings on shoulder tension. And slamming barred doors and the sound of keys in locks has significantly impaired my comfort in visiting people held in prisons and jails. And a male choir singing “God Bless America” brings me to tears.¹⁶⁰

“Shoulder tension” is the worst reaction ascribed to Vietnamese music decades after the war. Other POWs found they were grateful to hear that music because it reminded them they were free again. Gene Smith explained,

When I brush my teeth, I think of Vietnam. When I get down to a little sliver of soap that we used to guard with our life, because once you ran out you ran out. There’s not a day, there is not a day that I’m not reminded of Vietnam. But it’s not negatively. It just makes me thankful that I’m in the land of the free. Music is second only to smell in sensory memory. It’s just a part of life.¹⁶¹

I can only guess why the American soldiers fared so much better than the Gitmo prisoners, after enduring considerably worse treatment over a considerably longer time. Were the Vietnamese amateurs in a new style of torture, while the CIA had an additional fifty years to perfect their skill? Were the American soldiers better prepared through SERE training? Did the POWs’ communication network provide support and leadership


¹⁶¹ Smith, interview.
that was lacking in Gitmo? Did the extensive debriefing of the American POWs act as a form of therapy, while the Gitmo detainees held on to their emotional distress?

During captivity, most American POWs broke at some point from the physical torture, but the “no touch” strategies were a waste of time. Bill Metzger asserted, “Music/noise had little effect on our well-being. Psychological efforts had virtually no success or effect.”\(^{162}\) Jim Stockdale told his son that coercive techniques were “completely counterproductive. The worst thing they could do is back an American against the wall and say, “Now let me tell you what you’re gonna do.” Once again, the fighter pilot attitude contributed to their survival. Stockdale noted, “There’s some instinct, especially among that group of guys. If they thought they were gonna intimidate with that, that was exactly the wrong move, because to a man, everybody said, ‘Oh no, you are not!’ It just encouraged them.”\(^{163}\)

Whether the torture be physical or psychological, the outcome cannot be trusted, as the POWs regularly showed. John McCain stated, “I know from personal experience that abuse of prisoners does not provide good, reliable intelligence.”\(^{164}\) In 2015, Senator McCain sponsored an amendment bearing his name that banned all forms of torture by all agencies of the United States. The amendment came just months after the release of a “scathing” report on the CIA’s torture program at Guantánamo. Perhaps McCain already knew the pain of music torture and its ineffectiveness. Propaganda might not have always

\(^{162}\) Bill Metzger, e-mail message to author, September 7, 2015.

\(^{163}\) Stockdale, Jr., interview.

worked on the POWs, but propaganda starring the POWs had quite an impact. The next chapter will explore how Vietnam used American prisoners to change world opinion.
Chapter Fourteen

POWs as Political Pawns

The North Vietnamese knew they were overmatched militarily, but they figured they could at least win the propaganda war by brutalizing American POWs until they denounced their government and “confessed” that they had bombed schoolchildren and villagers.

– Jonathan Mahler “The Prisoner”¹

The POWs were more than recipients of propaganda; they were propaganda. The Vietnamese were not ashamed to admit that their military could never defeat the U.S., but their propaganda could. Hanoi Hannah reminded the prisoners daily:

We are not going to defeat you in Vietnam. We are going to defeat you in your universities and on your streets by turning public opinion against the war, so that your administration will have to withdraw their troops, and when they are withdrawn to a sufficient level, we will launch an offensive and defeat you, just like we did the French at Dien Bien Phu.²

Their most powerful propaganda came directly from the Americans they had captured, giving the POWs “influence and significance disproportionate to their small numbers.”³

A Politburo resolution outlined their goals: “Our humanitarian policy toward American pilots is aimed at further illuminating our just cause in order to win over the American people, support our enemy proselytism operations, and win the sympathy of world opinion for our people’s resistance war against the Americans to save the nation.”⁴


² House Subcommittee on National Security Policy and Scientific Developments of Committee on Foreign Affairs, Statement of Colonel Norris Overly, 92d Cong., 1st sess., 1971, 42.


This “humanitarian” policy contradicted reality, according to a defected North Vietnamese doctor:

Human beings—American POWs held in North Vietnam are being treated as commodities. According to the policies of the Central Committee, the Lao Dong Party (NVN Communist Party) intends to use these American POWs as hostages in bargaining to achieve its political objectives. Illustrative of this is the statement made by Hanoi’s representatives in Paris that North Vietnam now holds only 367 American POWs in captivity. Ladies and Gentlemen, this is untrue. I know that already by mid-1967, when I departed North Vietnam, over 800 American POWs were then in captivity in North Vietnam.5

Multiple recovered documents and indoctrination programs made it clear that Vietnam considered the POWs “bargaining chips” to be played at will.6 From the moment of capture until the day of release, cameras documented the prisoners and the humane treatment they received. When the cameras arrived, the propaganda began, but the public never saw what happened before the cameras arrived. The Vietnamese needed statements from the POWs confessing their war crimes and confirming their humane treatment, and they would brutally torture the prisoners until they acquiesced.7 Robbie Risner revealed the pain and shame surrounding this involuntary propaganda:

We were tortured and forced to make statements on tape and also in writing that were prejudicial to the good of the United States. We were forced to do this under severe torture, and we lived in abject misery knowing that we had betrayed our country and we couldn’t die. They wouldn’t let us die; they only tortured us. And


6 House Subcommittee on National Security Policy and Scientific Developments of Committee on Foreign Affairs, Statement of Colonel Norris Overly, 92d Cong., 1st sess., 1971, 42.

yet there were people who believed that we were [willingly] making statements which were detrimental to the pursuit of the war.  

POWS were also “encouraged” through torture to meet with visitors. David Hoffman met Jane Fonda under these circumstances:

The point is that that appearance was by no means voluntary, and was extremely well orchestrated and scripted down to the point where we were told: “This is what you’re going to say if they ask this question, and this is what you’re going to do if they ask that.” And if you deviate, then you know damn well that somebody is going to get hurt, and hurt rather badly.

The East German propaganda documentary series *Pilots in Pajamas* featured staged scenes, forced interviews, and biased commentary alleging the remorse of the American air pirates and the humane and lenient treatment they received from their gentle captors. Risner was interviewed for the series but he struggled with the forced dishonesty:

Of all the indignities we were forced to undergo, I guess I resented meeting the foreign delegations more than any other. There was something so basically inhuman about appearing before the delegations and being asked how your food was and having to say it was excellent when it was not. Or to questions of your treatment, to lie in front of the cameras and say it was great, when they had literally tortured the stuffings out of you to make you appear.

To make matters worse, the film was edited to rephrase the questions and “make an innocent answer seem much more sinister.”

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8 Ted Gittinger, Oral History Interview of Robinson Risner, Austin, TX, November 4, 1981, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, National Archives and Records Administration.


Other propaganda films featuring the POWs seemed suspect, so lip reading experts analyzed the footage of “captured pilots allegedly confessing to atrocities and found that nowhere on the film did the lips of the pilots match the accompanying audio dialogue.”12 Instead, the men were making small talk about their age, health, and families. This calls into question which propaganda statements could actually be attributed to the prisoners.

Some former prisoners admitted they spoke on the radio as punishment. Dick Stratton confessed, “After torture sessions, part of the price paid was to record the Camp News which would be played over the 1MC (radio) around sunset each day. I got a lot of that.”13 Hearing himself on the radio, he moaned, “Bad enough in front of the Commies but now for his fellows? Those pricks. Why hadn’t he taken more torture? God, why couldn’t he?”14 Convinced he had betrayed his family and nation, he considered suicide.15 Peter Schoeffel was also “forced to give one ‘news’ broadcast on camp radio.”16

Of the thirty-five POWs I interviewed, only six claimed to have performed over the camp radio. Several of them were asked to but resisted. Mo Baker explained, “We felt that it would have served the captor’s propaganda program somehow.”17 Bill Metzger
clarified, “Few, if any, did without having been tortured first.”18 Ralph Galati proclaimed, “NO! Was that assertive enough for you? NO!”19 This was a typical response, which is understandable after watching the TV movie When Hell Was in Session. Following a vicious torture session, Hanoi Hannah comes on the air:

You all know Jeremiah Denton. Well, his conscience has just gotten the best of him, and he has just voluntarily confessed to all his crimes. All you other war criminals could do yourself a favor by doing the same thing. Now in case you fellas have any doubt, here is the war criminal himself. “My name is Jeremiah Denton. I am an imperialist war criminal. I apologize to Ho Chi Minh and the North Vietnamese people for the crimes I have committed.”20

These “confessions” were broadcast to all the other prisoners and then used to increase anti-war sentiment globally.

Torture was not the only method of extracting statements and appearances, as the Vietnamese often “used religious services, medical treatment and PW mail as bribes or exploitation.”21 Stockdale discovered the importance of propaganda when his captors refused to treat his severely broken leg. The camp supervisor told him, “You have a medical problem and a political problem. Politics come before medicine in the DRV (Democratic Republic of Vietnam). You fix the political problem in your head first, and then we’ll see the doctors.”22 Stockdale’s leg was never treated.

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18 Bill Metzger, e-mail message to author, September 7, 2015.

19 Ralph Galati, telephone interview by author, September 5, 2014.

20 Ramen Vermicelli, When Hell Was in Session, January 12, 2015, video, 1:33:40, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vh_4qUL6dHQ.


The Vietnamese granted “special treatment” to POWs with “special social standing,” and this saved John McCain’s life.23 After a debilitating capture, McCain was taken to interrogation. Knowing the severity of his injuries, he promised to talk if the guards would take him to the hospital. A doctor examined him and declared, “It’s too late.”24 A couple hours later, The Bug burst into McCain’s cell and said, “Your father is a big admiral. Now we take you to the hospital.” At the hospital, he was forced to apologize for his crimes and thank the Vietnamese for his treatment before he could have the surgeries he desperately needed. A French journalist filmed the infamous interview (see fig. 14.1).


In addition to confessions and claims of good treatment, the Vietnamese sought visual representations of the prisoners’ condition. According to Bud Day, his captors...

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believed “that a picture was worth 1,000 words,” so they requested paintings in the hopes
that a “POW art gallery would do much to dispel the notion of mistreatment.
Simultaneously, they wanted to create the illusion that POWs simply lollygagged around
in comfort, painting pictures at their leisure, and attending church on holidays.” When
prisoners refused to participate in the art project, they were warned, “No paint, no write,”
meaning they would lose their mail privileges. One of the men who did paint found out
through the mail that his painting was “part of the exhibit of POW art in Moscow.”25 A
propaganda article boasted of the POWs’ freedom to draw but provided an excuse for the
lack of artwork: “In this camp, unfortunately there are not yet many such meaningful
drawings and impressions. This is understandable. Not that all US air pirates have
quickly come to see the truth. Not a few of them still have the frame of mind of
aggressors.”26 This is a clear acknowledgement that cooperation comes before art
supplies.

The Camp Authority knew that ensuring consistent cooperation would require a
ture change of heart, so “several hours a day” were “devoted to prisoner
indoctrination.”27 Vietnam had plenty of experience in this area, considering all citizens
attended mandatory indoctrination classes three nights a week.28 Hal Butler declared,


26 “US Pilots Captured in Viet Nam,” 2202012051, October 1969, Vietnam Center and Sam

27 “VC Policies for the Handling of U.S. Prisoners of War,” Record of MACV Part 2,
F015900240001, 18 May 1967, Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, Texas Tech
University, https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=F015900240001 (accessed
February 3, 2021).

(accessed December 6, 2014).
“Communist control over the North Vietnamese population is absolute and virtually
costant…. Big Daddy tells people what they should do and what they should think the
whole waking day.”29

However, the American POWs were not as pliable as the guards had hoped. Stuart
Rochester wrote, “Contrary to Vietnamese intentions and expectations, the rigorous
indoctrination regimen generally did not chasten or soften the men but rather incurred
deepening resentment. Familiarity bred contempt rather than passive acceptance.”30

Major Bui Tin, the North Vietnamese Commander of American Prisoners of War, also
known as The Cat, confirmed,

A few American pilots proved to be strong-willed and possessed a lot of
perseverance. When they had to undergo political reeducation, they refused to
accept those brain-washing ideals (for example, they refused to accept that
America is a country that had violated many crime wars) but those pilots, like
Stockdale, Denton, were punished.31

Why were some Americans not susceptible to brainwashing? Jeane Kirkpatricks’s
classic essay, “Dictatorships & Double Standards,” could help explain. She illustrated
how “revolutionary Communist regimes… make demands for change that so violate
internalized values and habits” that outsiders often cannot reconcile what they are told


30 Stuart L. Rochester and Frederick Kiley, Honor Bound: The History of American Prisoners of

31 Bui Tin, comment on “Return with Honor” PBS Online Forum,
with how they feel.\textsuperscript{32} To believe their captors, they would have to refuse everything they had ever known.

Richard Jones applied Kurt Lewin’s Change Management Model to determine why the Vietnamese failed. This three-step theory involves unfreezing, change, and refreezing. Jones defined unfreezing as “the process of breaking down the individual’s idea of who he is,” leading him to “question the validity of his current value system.”\textsuperscript{33} Physical and mental instability (such as fatigue, hunger, and violence) can speed up this process. Isolation and torture helped the North Vietnamese complete the first step successfully. “However,” Jones noted, “the change process was ignored.” The captors failed to offer “alternative ideas, values, and beliefs to reconcile identity questions,” leaving the change process incomplete. The propaganda was so outrageously inaccurate that the prisoners could not attach legitimacy to the new ideals. As the torture continued, they “saw communism as the embodiment of senseless cruelty” and gained “an even deeper conviction” for their cause.\textsuperscript{34}

The Vietnamese were not completely unsuccessful, and George Coker explained how his captors employed a form of gaslighting to combat these convictions:

When times are very hard, and the body is in a great deal of discomfort if not actual pain, the mind can slip easily, almost gratefully, into this state of depression. The danger, of course, is that, in this weakened mental and physical state, the enemy’s attempts at using propaganda or trying to warp your thinking are likely to be successful. A significant part of this state of depression is the loss of confidence. This is exactly what the enemy is after. He tries to destroy your


\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
confidence in your moral values. He can then start to completely confuse you and start you believing in some of his values.\textsuperscript{35}

With the prisoners completely isolated in the early years, propaganda was the only viewpoint they heard, making them more vulnerable to indoctrination.\textsuperscript{36}

At first, once the Vietnamese thought they had turned one of the prisoners, they would put him in a cell with a resister, hoping his newfound beliefs were contagious. Instead, the wavering American would be corrected by the resister. Everett Alvarez found himself sympathizing with his interrogator once, but his roommate told him he had been brainwashed. He admitted he probably was and apologized.\textsuperscript{37} The guards picked up on this pattern of roommates negating their progress and developed a more effective strategy. POWs who were starting to believe the propaganda were put together so they could reinforce the ideologies.

Three officers, Navy Comdr. Bob Schweitzer, Marine Lt. Col. Ed Miller and Navy Capt. Walter Wilber (see fig. 14.2), who had started to believe the propaganda were separated from the other POWs and placed together in a cell where they could reinforce their new convictions. Their shift in attitude became clear in 1969, when many prisoners were tortured to broadcast propaganda on the radio. Most of the Americans “gave tell-tale vocal signs of broadcasting under duress,” purposely mangling pronunciation, speaking in monotone, or changing the order of words. Miller and Schweitzer, on the other hand, “broadcast enthusiastically against U.S. activities in Vietnam” in what was dubbed “The


\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 138.
Bob and Ed Show.” They recorded lengthy programs full of “virulent antiwar, even anti-American, material.” Sounding almost identical to the “Voice of Vietnam” propaganda, they “delivered these offerings as though they were their own original ideas; it was apparent that they believed the things they were saying.” Miller proclaimed, “My country’s immoral and illegal actions which are now culminated in the tragedy of Vietnam is America’s shame and a blight on the world’s conscience.”


Denton ordered, “Stop writing, stop taping, communicate with us,” but there was no response. Schweitzer quickly saw the error of his ways and returned to the Wing

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38 Alvarez, Chained Eagle, 234.


40 Ibid., 576.

41 Ibid., 558.

42 Ibid., 524.
with regret, but Wilber and Miller spent all of their time together, growing “more vehemently opposed” to the other POWs by the day. They acted as jailers, locking up their fellow soldiers. They enjoyed the freedom to move around and talk to other prisoners, persuading other POWs to join them. They enjoyed milk, beer, and other special treatment, which enticed several enlisted men to their side. Wilber, Miller, and their followers formed the Peace Committee (PC), but the other POWs called them the “Peace Clowns.” Alvarez speculated that the officers were never offered early release because the Vietnamese had hoped they could brainwash the others.

The SROs gave the collaborators multiple chances to change their minds, briefing them on every form of torture used on the Americans. They responded with a “blanket justification: everyone knew the consequences of breaking camp regulations. It was as simple as that.” Wilber insisted that “the illegality of the American intervention justified the dissenters’ activities.”

Accepting favors like ice cream and trips to the circus would upset the prisoners who missed out, but giving “real aid and comfort to the communists” crossed the line.

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43 Alvarez, Chained Eagle, 234.
44 Hubbell, P.O.W., 559.
45 Alvarez, Chained Eagle, 237.
46 Ernest Brace, A Code to Keep (Central Point, OR: Hellgate Press, 1988); 189.
47 Ibid.
48 Alvarez, Chained Eagle, 234.
49 Ibid., 236.
50 Hubbell, P.O.W., 576.
51 Alvarez, Chained Eagle, 234.
The Peace Committee performed for visiting delegations, singing the NVA fight song, “La Phong Vietnam,” and “Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?” They composed and performed antiwar poetry and songs for the Vietnamese. They starred in propaganda videos and photo shoots without being tortured to do so. Their radio broadcasts played constantly as they willingly vilified their country.

Every senior officer demanded that the Peace Committee stop recording for the radio, but they ignored the orders. They even formed a choir so their songs could play through every loudspeaker. By 1971, the SRO stripped Miller and Wilber of their ranking authority. The other POWs took more extreme measures. Alvarez recalled, “There were cries of ‘Traitors!’ and angry calls for them to be hung by their balls.” Some even plotted to execute the group. Sensing trouble, the Peace Committee requested asylum in Sweden or the choice to remain in Vietnam, but they decided to go back to the U.S. to share their knowledge of Marxism. They were formally charged.

57 Ibid., 234.
59 Ibid.
with collaboration upon their return, but after one member of the Peace Committee committed suicide, all of the charges were dropped.

The Peace Committee made propaganda much easier on the Vietnamese. Torture was not required to attract participants, and no one worried that they would go off-script. The group was excited to meet foreign visitors and share the gospel of Marx, but the consistent appearance of the same ten prisoners caught the eye of Washington. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird released a statement in response:

North Vietnam has claimed that our men are being well treated. If that is the case, such verification must be made through impartial inspections, as required by the Geneva Convention. Propaganda broadcasts, carefully selected visitors to Hanoi, and staged films are not the proper means for disclosing the true status of prisoners.\(^{61}\)

Impartial inspections were never allowed.

Plenty of propaganda was made before the Peace Committee formed, and most of the prisoners were featured in at least one of these spectacles. After the “Stratton Incident” in early 1967, when a POW bowed deeply in all directions with glazed eyes at a press conference, the world was convinced that the POWs were brainwashed. Vietnam needed damage control, so they quickly invited specific sympathizers to interview the prisoner, hopefully determining that he was mentally sound. The visitors were satisfied, but the U.S. government was not impressed with the “model prison” housing very few prisoners. They called the camp a “deception” and insisted that the photos were staged.\(^{62}\)

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\(^{62}\) Blakey, Prisoner at War, 193.
The U.S. was correct in its assumption. Stratton’s interview took place at the Plantation, Hanoi’s Citadel, which was the showplace camp. All films and photos of the POWs came from this camp until Laird’s statement in 1969. Suddenly, all propaganda came out of the Zoo (Cu Loc). Regardless of location, all materials were “staged and carefully orchestrated.”63 In 1970, twenty POWs were moved into a separate area at the Zoo with a large courtyard and the freedom to exercise and play games. Norm McDaniel was thrilled with his new living arrangements, assuming they would go home soon. He recalled, “We were mistaken and found, much to our dismay, that our group’s treatment was not representative of that of most of the other prisoners. In fact, we had been set up so that the NV could take pictures of us and spread propaganda about how well the U.S. prisoners were being treated.”64 Both Stratton and McDaniel would star in propaganda films.

The most detailed account of the POWs was the documentary series *Pilots in Pajamas*, filmed at the Plantation in 1967. Dick Stratton made his film debut in the shower, a feature available only at the show camp. While he washed, the narrator said, “Navy Pilot Lt. Commander Richard Allen Stratton needs a good supply of water although he and the likes of him show a special preference for dropping their bombs on the dikes and irrigation systems of the North.”65

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None of the collaborators appeared in this series, and no POWs appeared willingly, which makes the closing music mysterious. The final episode concluded with a song attributed to the prisoners, “which is sure to turn the ears of the global strategists in Washington red; as a rejection, as the funeral march of a defeated policy,” according to the narrator. To the tune of the American folk song “Red River Valley,” a small group of men sang along with banjo accompaniment while scenes of their captures by women and children were interspersed with footage of peaceful farming villages.

When I crashed in the Red River Valley
My jet had been hit by a SAM.
I was captured by a posse of peasants,
And my life as a prisoner began.
Being tied and led off to their village,
I was frightened and feared for my life.
I was doctored and fed by their fireside
Just as though I had caused them no strife.
I have moved to the Hanoi Hilton
With its radio, close shaves, and good books
New clothes, twin blanket, and toothpaste
Hot soup, good rice from the cooks.
As I study and read up their history
Their long struggle for unity and peace
Their high hopes and great plans for the future,
I pray that this war will soon cease.
Some day when the peace talks have ended
I’ll return to the ones I love dear.
I’ll remember this Red River Valley
and the people, who live peacefully there.66

The lyrics echo the propaganda messages of Vietnam, which originally made me wonder if a Vietnamese had written it, but the quality of the language suggests a native speaker. The voices sound American, so I wondered if some visiting delegates had sung for the recording. After scouring the Internet for any clues, I discovered one mention of

66 Ibid.
the song. Ray Vohden wrote a book about his experience as a POW in the Cuban Program. He explained that he thought the program was meant to be for early releases, because the men were all good candidates. Two were injured, two starred in *Pilots in Pajamas*, and some were weak resisters. Most importantly, “one of the recent shootdowns had written a song about the Red River Valley for the *Pilots in Pajamas* TV documentary and had visited a delegation.”67

Although only nineteen men were part of the Cuban Program, one of whom died from the torture and several of whom were not yet in prison, I still cannot determine which prisoner wrote the song. There is no evidence of any POW claiming involvement in the creation of this piece. Considering the circumstances, I postulate that a prisoner was either threatened/tortured into the endeavor, or pleasantly surprised by his living conditions at the show camp. As the only extant song written by an American POW which purports humane and lenient treatment, the ballad’s origins and circumstances of creation would be valuable information.

**To Sing or Not to Sing**

The psychological damage is dependent on various factors and therefore difficult to predict; what we do know is that for some survivors, forms of torture involving music were viewed by them as amongst the worst they had experienced, while for others, it offered them a way to cope.

– Morag Josephine Grant, “The Illogical Logic of Music Torture”68

When studying music torture, the topic of propaganda may seem irrelevant, but Vietnam employed music in their propaganda. Although most researchers of music

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67 Ray Vohden, *A Story of the Fifth Longest Held Pow in Us History: First POW Released at Homecoming* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2009), 258.

torture have focused on volume as the principal agent of violence, Juliane Brauer identified three torture methods involving music in the Nazi concentration camps. Prisoners were forced to sing, play, and hear music, resulting in emotional pain and physical harm. In fact, the Auschwitz orchestra had the highest suicide rates because the musicians were ashamed of the impact they had on their fellow prisoners.\(^{69}\)

In Vietnam, music was used as a weapon to control both minds and bodies. Being tortured to sing or play music makes the act of singing or playing torture in itself. The music and the pain are subconsciously bonded, entwining the sounds with the memories. If physical violence is not involved, can forced performance still be considered torture? Josephine Grant has argued, “Not all examples of forced singing occur in contexts and reach a severity that can be classed as torture, though they still constitute a violation of prisoners’ rights.”\(^{70}\) I propose that singing which could be considered forced must include either violence or the fear of violence. If a captor has threatened a prisoner in the past and followed through on that threat, the prisoner would wisely assume that any new threats pose great risks of danger. The POWs in Vietnam were constantly threatened with torture and death, and they saw those threats come to fruition. At some point, singing becomes the least painful option.

The questionable aspects of this argument concern the use of propaganda on POWs and forcing them to participate in propaganda. For the Peace Committee, who “might have been brainwashed,” the performances they gave to foreign dignitaries

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seemed voluntary, but prior to their re-education, they would have balked at the idea of singing the enemy’s fight song. They were not forced to sing at the time, but I could argue that their forced indoctrination was the only way they would sing, therefore the singing was not technically by choice.

The other POWs refused to sing the enemy’s songs, but some did willingly perform on Christmas and other occasions for their fellow prisoners. However, they did not know ahead of time that their performance would be used in anti-American propaganda. The debate over whether they should have expected it, and whether they were traitors, was a sore subject fifty years later. Dick Stratton protested, “Never did understand how my fellow prisoners could sing for pleasure and VC propaganda while guys were being beaten, tortured and otherwise abused. But then, I was not in charge; so who was I to judge. I did not enjoy it; even to this day I cringe when I hear their songs or hear them perform.”71 On the other hand, many prisoners considered the performances their most uplifting times in prison. Grant was apparently correct in her assessment: “The line between music and music torture in situations of ‘reeducation’ can in some cases depend very much on the individual, with certain prisoners drawing strength from the opportunities they had to make or hear music, others however regarding this as a form of torture.”72

I have already discussed the importance of faith for the POWs, but the Vietnamese also valued religious services as a propaganda tool. A VC interrogation guide instructed, “Freedom to practice their religions and to observe their traditions and

71 Stratton, e-mail.

customs should be granted to all US PW’s. Appropriate assistance should be provided to help them fulfill their religious ceremonies, particularly during the Christmas season."73 A Politburo resolution explained the reasoning behind the religious freedom: “As for the issue of religious services, arrangements should be made for them to attend church services regularly. We should assign a number of good [reliable] Catholic priests or Protestant pastors (depending on the prisoners’ religion) to this task in order to combine holding church services with our efforts to educate them.”74

The government required any religious activities for the POWs to include indoctrination, so the benefits of the service would be twofold. The prisoners would be coerced into supporting the Vietnamese, and they would participate in propaganda displaying their good treatment. Grant argues, “Systems of what is called reeducation are rarely limited to exposing prisoners to ‘improving’ elements: they are about imposing state ideology and doctrine, and systematically breaking down opponents to the point at which they no longer pose any threat.”75 By repurposing the spiritual music of the prisoners to support a doctrine they denied, the Vietnamese attacked the prisoners at a spiritual level.

The POWs had varied reactions to this unendorsed use of their music. When the Camp Authority asked prisoners to record music to play on Christmas of 1966, there was “dissension” between those who worried the tapes would be used as propaganda and those who simply wanted to raise morale. Alvarez recalled, “We were quickly vindicated

73 Pike, “Treatment of Prisoners of War by The Viet Cong.”
74 “North Vietnam Politburo Resolution No. 194-NQ/TW.”
75 Grant, “Pathways to Music Torture,” 16.
as a hush fell over the camp and the speakers crackled with the familiar, albeit nostalgic bounce of ‘Jingle Bells,’ ‘Puff the Magic Dragon’ and ‘Amazing Grace,’ sung with such deep emotion by fellow captives.”

George Hall had been a naysayer, but he conceded, “Patches Gaither played on the guitar and sang the most beautiful rendition of ‘Amazing Grace’ I have ever heard. Several others sang carols. All in all it was uplifting and left us in much better spirits than the year before.”

Alvarez highlighted the powerful effect this music had on the POWs:

Fleeting, we forgot about the stench and the rot as we shared remembrances. In those jaunty sounds we heard America again, sprightly, young and fresh. The tunes seemed to waft over the camp like a playful wind, dispelling the gloom and cleansing the squalor. It was a tonic, a refreshing close to an horrendous year.

A similar debate ensued in 1967, when the camp commander decided to stage a Christmas pageant. Quincy Collins stated, “I knew it was for propaganda. It was a toss-up of should we do this for the good that it would do the troops, to hear some hymns and Christmas stuff from home, or is this all for the good of the enemy’s propaganda machine.”

He figured if he could convince the commander to record the performance to build morale for the troops, it might be worth it. He asked his SRO if he should participate in potential propaganda, and the officer replied, “Yes, if you’re not sure that your name has been released, that U.S. authorities know that you’re alive, or if you feel that something worthwhile can be gained for us in terms of passing information and

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76 Alvarez, Chained Eagle, 173.

77 George Hall, Pat Hall, and Bob Pittman, Commitment to Honor: A Prisoner of War Remembers Vietnam (Jackson, MS: Franklin Printers, 2005), 70.

78 Alvarez, Chained Eagle.

messages.” At this point, Collins was listed as MIA, meaning his family had no idea he was alive. The North Vietnamese purposely withheld the names of many POWs, as seen in this 1966 directive from the Enemy Proselyting Staff: “In order not to disclose the identity and number of prisoners and prevent their contact with the enemy, the mail of POWs whose names have not been made public or known by the enemy or who are stubborn, will not be forwarded.” Appearing in propaganda could give his family peace of mind.

Collins rehearsed his small POW choir for a month, singing four-part harmonies from an English hymnal that mysteriously appeared. The guards provided a small pump organ so Glen Perkins could play accompaniment. The prisoners sang and talked to each other in a time when many were isolated, so “life became a bit more tolerable.”

On Christmas Eve, Collins and his choir were blindfolded and driven to the Plantation. The doors opened to reveal over one hundred other Americans, many of whom they knew. Collins laughed, “They’re looking at me like I’m dead. I’m supposed to be dead.” The choir gathered in front of the Christmas tree and prepared to sing. Collins assigned each member an area of the room and they began to communicate by talking or tapping their cheek. “We wanted to know camp names, how many POW’s were in each camp, who was the ranking American, was torture prevalent, general esprit of the troops, any bit of information that might be of interest to our group.”

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80 Brian Leonard, director, Stories of Survival, DVD. (Discovery Channel Productions, 1998).
81 Malcolm Toon, Interim Analysis.
82 Collins, interview.
83 Ibid.
84 Ibid.
The room was crowded with members of the press with their loudly flashing bulbs and the guards worked in vain to stop the flow of prisoner communication. “A sort of low-key pandemonium reigned.” It was time for Collins to sing his solo, and he was sure the guards were preoccupied, so he warned the accompanist not to fall out of his chair. “Glen, I’ve decided I’m not gonna sing the regular lyrics. I’m gonna sing messages. I don’t think the Gooks will catch on.” Glen replied, “You’re gonna get shot!” In an operatic style sure to fool the guards Collins began, “Oh Holy Night, we’re over at the Zoo, a hundred and seventy-five guys just like you. Jim Stockdale leads us with Denton, Risner too, please keep the faith and be loyal and true.” The audience reacted with approval and Collins beamed, “It felt good and I was happy as hell to be an American Fighter Pilot! Screw Ho Chi Minh!” Better yet, the song would be broadcast several times, so all the POWs could hear it.

The Christmas choir was a success in many ways. The information communicated during their performance was so plentiful it took more than four months to spread to everyone. The music itself helped with morale, but fooling the guards was an extra boost. Ironically, it was during Collins’s defiant solo that the press snapped the propaganda photo that would be recognized by his mother, changing his status from MIA to POW (see fig. 14.3).

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86 Collins, interview.

87 Ibid.
The Christmas program had some drawbacks as well. Robbie Risner commended the “spiritual benefits” and ability to pass information, but added, “We had begun to realize, however, that we were simply providing propaganda.” He feared the photos suggested, “Look, folks! This is how we treat the American prisoners. Here they are in a church service being administered by one of our own ministers. Isn’t this nice?”

The sermon followed the expressed goal of using religion to indoctrinate POWs. The Vietnamese minister, who was “dressed like the Pope,” was translated by the camp commander, Rabbit. Whether the translations were accurate cannot be proven, but the

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88 Robinson Risner, *The Passing of the Night: My Seven Years as a Prisoner of the North Vietnamese* (Duncanville, TX: World Wide Printing, 1999), 191.

89 Collins, interview.
resulting English sermon was “about 90 percent Communist propaganda about how we should confess our crimes and help them get the Americans to give up the war.”\footnote{Hall, \textit{Commitment to Honor}, 57.} Paul Galanti remembered the “Christmas story according to Marx and Lenin”:

Jesus was a poor working man who was being exploited by the capitalistic foreign invader Pontius Pilate, but Jesus rallied the masses against the imperialist colonials and for that he was martyred by the criminal invaders. Moral. We are all the same. Only the U.S. government exploiting its lackeys in South Vietnam, like the Roman imperialists, are attempting to enslave the heroic “Vietnamese people.”\footnote{Paul E. Galanti, “Christmas in Hanoi (x7),” \textit{Ex-POW Bulletin}, January-February 2012, 14.}

Rabbit also served as the translator for the Catholic Mass (see fig. 14.4), where Father Ho gave a homily about the Christ Child weeping “because of the napalm being dropped on the people of Vietnam by the cruel U.S. air criminals.”\footnote{Gerald Coffee, \textit{Beyond Survival: Building on the Hard Times - A POW’s Inspiring Story} (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1990), 212.} Stratton learned that “baby Jesus, a good communist of a working class family, being born into poverty, was persecuted by the capitalists. He and his family were forced to flee Bethlehem for their lives in their Jeep into Egypt to avoid the American Imperialists and the Yankee Air Pirates. It indeed was a most inspiring sermon; it made one weep with laughter.”\footnote{Richard Stratton, “My Last Roman Catholic Mass,” Tales of SE Asia, http://talesofseasia.com/mylastrcmass.html (accessed December 8, 2014).}
After these propaganda-heavy services, the press sought more propaganda from the POWs. Robert Frishman was asked his impression of the church service, and he botched the answers in ways that Americans would catch. He said, “I was reminded of the Protestant mass at my home country. I am grateful for the camp authorities for giving us the opportunity to hold the mass and celebrate the Christmas.”

During and after the Christmas propaganda show, the Americans hoodwinked their captors, implying that combining religion and political indoctrination was not effective. In fact, the POWs were bolstered by every instance of fooling their captors. The Vietnamese objectives—“To free the POW’s from the effect of enemy political

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indoctrination; to destroy their haughty and self-conceited feeling that Americans are second to none, that they should never harm U. S. honor and that they are superior people who had come here to dispense favors”—were even further from being met.  

The biggest downside of the POWs’ Christmas performance was the torture of Glen Perkins:

The Communists use physical abuse as well as propaganda to fight their wars. We weren’t treated like prisoners of war, we were treated like criminals. The Communists thrive on lies and distortions. They even tortured me so I would play the organ for photographers and then it would be used to make it appear as if church services were allowed and they were not.  

Quincy Collins may have performed voluntarily, but at least one POW did not. Perkins was tortured into playing the organ for Christmas services three years in a row. The Vietnamese thought this instrument was necessary to convince the Americans this was an authentic religious service. One propaganda piece boasted, “With the organ accompanying them, the mass is not very different from the ones they have at home.”  

Although he was tortured systematically along with the other prisoners, this particular torture affected him differently. When he returned to America, he wrote, “The wounds have healed leaving the scars, yet the mental humiliation and physical abuses were hard to submerge.”

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97 Glendon Perkins, e-mail message to author, February 26, 2016.

98 Tape Recorded Interviews, The Vietnam Center and Archive.

99 Wyatt, We Came Home, 413.
Prior to his time in prison, Perkins had owned a Hammond organ and played it regularly. He had found his emotional release through music. He believed that “music removes you from the moment to another place.” After the Christmas program, he looked at the organ and saw the ropes used to make him play. The instrument could no longer bring him joy. He struggled to recover from the psychological distress without his musical means of escape. Brauer noted a similar reaction in the Nazi concentration camps. She said, “Musicians forced to play music they knew and loved in NS camps often experienced a breakdown of their musical identity and could not cope, but others were able to reinterpret the music on their own terms and use it as a tool of survival.”

The difference between Collins and Perkins was their ability to control the narrative. Perkins felt powerless, while Collins was able to “reformulate the meaning of the songs.” Adding his own words to the music, and therefore transmitting vital information, put Collins in control of the situation. If Perkins could have created his own alternative motive to play the organ, he might have regained control, allowing him to cope with the outcome.

In 1968, Rabbit asked Collins to lead the Christmas choir again, so Collins asked for the same guarantee. “If you will record us and play it over the PA system for the troops, we’ll do it.” Rabbit promised, but the songs never played on the radio. Collins sent a message to Harry Johnson, who was three or four buildings over, saying “Harry,

100 Perkins, e-mail.
101 Brauer, “Music and Violence.”
102 Ibid.
103 Collins, interview.
I’ve got an idea how we can get even with this bastard.” A message was eventually tapped back. “Okay, I’m with you.” Collins had “convinced the camp commander it would be good to have the Americans translate some of their songs into English, and sing it in English for the enjoyment of our troops. He thought it was a great idea!” As Collins relayed the story, I exclaimed, “He thinks you’ve turned!” Collins laughed, “Oh yeah! A quisling! And some of my fellow mates thought I was. But we had a plan in mind and executed it.”

His plan required the same cunning wit he had used in his “O Holy Night” solo. He created a radio show called the “Camp BS.” When Rabbit asked the significance of the title, Collins replied, “Well, it’s like CBS, Columbia Broadcasting System, or NBC, National Broadcasting Corporation. It’s an abbreviation. The Camp BS is the Camp Broadcasting System.” Rabbit approved and the Americans felt they had won another victory.

The show began with Collins and Johnson proclaiming “Welcome to the Zoo Camp BS program!” After hearing nothing but propaganda for years, the POWs “fell out of their seats” at that introduction. Collins performed translations of Vietnamese songs, but if the real song was named “Lilacs in June,” he would change it to something like “Corn Cobs in August.” The hosts proceeded to use “every double entendre” they could imagine, “including the accordion player with big boobs.” The show was a comedic masterpiece, and the camp played it multiple times while the prisoners “were just laughing their butts off over this.” Someone failed to see the humor or truly believed that Collins had turned, and they reported to Rabbit, “This guy Collins had got to you.” He

104 Ibid.
was sent to the punishment camp and was never allowed to perform on the radio or at a Vietnam-sanctioned event again.105

With Collins locked away in another part of the country, the Vietnamese needed someone else with musical skill to take the lead. Back in 1966, some prisoners had requested that Norm McDaniel sing some Christmas carols for them. When his interrogator relayed the message, McDaniel was confused how anyone knew he could sing. He insisted that he had no talent, but the interrogator warned, “You must try or else it will be very dangerous for you.”106 Frightened of being used for propaganda, he made a feeble attempt and thought he would be excused. The interrogator said it was “very bad singing,” but he would still be required to sing. He had no choice: he had to sing over the radio.

The next year, McDaniel was moved out of solitary into a cell with Quincy Collins and Mike Kerr. The commander ordered the three of them to prepare the Christmas program. McDaniel assumed if they refused, they would “be harassed and likely made to do something much less agreeable.” He also agreed with Collins that communicating with other prisoners was a great benefit.107 McDaniel performed in Collins’s choir for two years, and then he got promoted to leader. The change of leadership did not affect the goals of the singers. McDaniel recalled, “Now, they attempted to keep us isolated, but we would use that opportunity to communicate. As

105 Collins, interview.
107 Ibid.
singers, we’d try to put special words in the songs, so that any of the other prisoners heard it, they would know what’s happening.”

Following the death of Ho Chi Minh and the global letter-writing campaign of 1969, Vietnam was determined to prove their humane and lenient treatments of the POWs. Part of this effort included changing show camps from the Plantation to the Zoo. After moving a special selection of prisoners to the Zoo, Rabbit began his new career as a “veritable recreation director, supervising music and art programs.” He formed a choir with the intent to “exploit them to produce film footage and artwork to impress a still skeptical public that the PWs were indeed being treated well.” Just as in Soviet and Nazi prison camps of the past, “music served several functions, including the attempt to portray the camps as spaces for cultural development rather than sites of maltreatment, illness, and death.” The prisoners, however, used every opportunity to communicate “in their choice of songs, gestures, or whatever.” Eugene McDaniel avowed, “The spirit to stay ahead of the enemy never died, no matter what the context, no matter what the treatment—and maybe there was an even greater attempt to stay ahead now because the Vietnamese were trying so hard to make us give them a good image.” Photographs and videos of the choir performing their Christmas services were transmitted around the world, and Norm McDaniel was featured in all of them (see figs. 14.5 and 14.6).

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110 Ibid.


113 Ibid., 137.
The POWs in the Zoo choirs believed the war was ending, hence the improved treatment and ability to sing together. They were unaware that they were the new show camp receiving special favors. Everett Alvarez, pictured above, claimed he did not know that photograph would be used for propaganda.\textsuperscript{114} At first I questioned his honesty, but considering the novelty of his position at the Zoo, it is possible that the men saw no reason for propaganda anymore.

\textsuperscript{114} Alvarez, \textit{Chained Eagle}, 230.
I noticed a trend in the propaganda photos coming out of Vietnam. In addition to staged pictures of sufficient food and lodging and the obligatory shots of prisoners opening mail, almost every photograph purports to show the POWs enjoying the luxuries of home. They are playing basketball or chess. They are decorating for Christmas. Quite often, they are performing music. The Vietnamese put extra effort into proving that the prisoners had access to musical instruments and chances to sing. They published a picture of Arthur Black and John Borling singing and playing accordion (see fig. 14.7). They showed John Davies playing guitar in his open-air cell (see fig. 14.8).

Guido Fackler wrote about music in the Nazi concentration camps, and his words easily fit the experience of the POWs in Vietnam. He said the music ensemble was created to perform for fellow prisoners:

However, while the apparent or ostensible purpose of these concerts was to entertain and edify the prisoners, they were, in fact, designed for a different purpose. When a delegation from the International Red Cross visited the camp in October 1935, the commander used the ensemble for propaganda: musical performances were used to make things seem better than they were; and the outside world was deceived as to the real purpose of the camps.\textsuperscript{115}

The camp-approved choirs of Vietnam had a different purpose depending on who you asked. The Vietnamese obviously saw it as propaganda alone, and some of the POWs agreed. When John McCain arrived at the Christmas program led by Quincy Collins, he

protested, “This is fucking bullshit. This is terrible. This isn’t Christmas. This is a propaganda show.”

For other prisoners, music was a necessity, a means of survival. Quincy Collins and his choir knew the joy of music in their lives and they believed that sharing their music would help other prisoners survive as well. They also seized control of the music in any way they could, and they gained a sense of power whenever they fooled their captors. No one can tell how much damage was done by each performance, or whether the benefits the POWs received outweighed the negatives. While it is unlikely that images of haggard, emaciated men singing in pajamas would convince anyone that they were treated well, propaganda efforts based on forced confessions provided visible results. For example, anti-war protestors regularly accused American pilots of intentionally killing babies, and this propaganda may have fit into the preconceptions of some of the anti-war protestors who were inclined to demonize the pilots anyway. A person likely to believe the party line about musical performances was likely to already believe the same line from other propaganda not involving music. As Mo Baker explained, propaganda truly controlled the people of Vietnam:

The most saddening thing about their society is the Communist Party’s control over the thoughts and minds of the people. The guards, we noted, could be turned on and off like a radio. They could be harsh or friendly, according to the order of the day from the camp commander. They did very little of their own thinking. A dramatic demonstration of this was just after the signing of the peace treaty, one of them was asked, “Who won the war?” The guard thought a bit and then said, “I don’t know, I haven’t read the Nhan Dan yet.” He had to wait to read the people’s paper to see what he was to think. It’s sad. Truth, in that community is whatever the Communist Party decides to print for the masses.


117 Wyatt, We Came Home, 36.
As citizens of a nation with free speech and free thought, the American prisoners fought against every attempt of the enemy to control them. If the Vietnamese required them to sing, they would find some way to profit from the experience.
Chapter Fifteen

Freedom through Music

Freedom has a taste to those who fight and almost die that the protected will never know.

—Anonymous inscription on Hanoi Hilton wall

When the POWs gathered for a homecoming celebration at the White House, their intense connection was palpable. President Nixon would later recall two emotional moments from the evening. As Irving Berlin led the crowd in “God Bless America,” the former prisoners “wept openly” and “almost seemed to be shouting so that the words could be heard all the way to Hanoi.” Then the band played John Philip Sousa’s “Stars and Stripes Forever” while the honor guard presented a tiny, homemade American flag crafted in a Vietnamese prison, and “a cheer grew and grew until it filled the canvas tent.” Patriotism fueled by music was the continued evidence of a mystic bond formed in Hanoi dungeons.

Ordinary Americans prior to capture, these men found extraordinary strength through each other. John McCain noted, “Often faced with the most dire of circumstances people come through with amazing acts of heroism and patriotism. It was only through the profound selfless acts of my fellow POWs that we were able to survive.” Patriotism became their rallying cry, as Dick Stratton demonstrated: “We retained our faith in our


country despite torture, humiliation, beatings, starvation, and medical neglect. In an age when it became the fashion to spit upon and burn our flag, we were manufacturing our own flags from scraps of cloth.”

American flags were forbidden in Vietnam prisons, which made them a priceless commodity for the POWs. When Mike Christian discovered a handkerchief in the gutter outside his cell, he immediately knew his objective. He spent months cleaning the cloth, gathering materials, and working overnight on his project. He created a needle from bamboo, ink from roof tiles, and glue from rice. He unraveled his blanket for thread and sewed the stars and stripes into his pajama shirt. When he waved his flag in the breeze, his cellmates “stood proudly at attention, many with tears in their eyes, and saluted. They finally had their most cherished symbol of home: an American flag.”

The POWs would fervently pledge their allegiance to their flag, “the most important and meaningful event” of each day.

The flag was eventually found during a shakedown and “the retribution was swift and severe.” The guards dragged Christian from the cell by his feet and tortured him all night. He returned in the morning, broken in body but not in spirit. With his eyes nearly swollen shut, he sat in the corner of his cell and began to make a new flag. Leo Thorsness

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6 McCain, “Preface.”

7 Spivey, Battlefields and Blessings.
recalled, “It was then, thousands of miles from home in a lonely prison cell, that he showed us what it is to be truly free.”

For decades, John McCain would tell the story of Mike Christian’s flag as a reminder of the sacrifices required for freedom. He wrote, “His patriotism and resilience helped us keep alive our hope and our pride in difficult circumstances. For it was with Mike, standing before a tiny flag he had covertly made for us to pledge our allegiance to our country from a distant prison cell, that our love for America’s blessings was so vividly reaffirmed.” Matt Hall captured the glory of this moment in his painting, “The Pledge” (see fig. 15.1). Mike Christian proudly raises his flag up to the lone lightbulb of Room Seven, surrounded by such heroes as Robbie Risner, Jerry Denton, Bud Day, John McCain, and Harry Jenkins. Reverence and solidarity are etched on their faces.


The North Vietnamese were not prepared for a group of prisoners this passionately devoted to their nation and each other. The Americans fully believed that their cause was righteous and they had done no wrong. While hearing themselves called war criminals and air pirates made the POWs fear reprisals, they would not accept those titles. Every time an interrogator claimed the Geneva Convention did not apply, the prisoner would adamantly proclaim his position as a U.S. soldier.

Still, the claims of the prisoners did not fit the Party line, and North Vietnam’s legalistic insistence that the pilots were not prisoners of war allowed for an unprecedented level of inhumanity. Torturing a prisoner to the brink of death was an acceptable method of acquiring a confirmation of humane treatment. It was also a proper tool for forcing a prisoner to meet with a foreign delegation or participate in a staged
event. NVN’s propaganda strategy involved demonizing American pilots to foster an anti-war sentiment back home while simultaneously seeming to prove their own benevolence through humane and lenient treatment of the “criminal imperialists.” This strategy could only be successful if the Americans admitted their war crimes and lauded their captors.

The Vietnamese tortured the POWs for false confessions and propaganda with the ultimate goal of brainwashing the prisoners—replacing their attitudes, beliefs, and personalities. Physical torture could effectively force a prisoner to follow commands, because the POWs would undergo torture until they gave in or died. Since the use of force is not effective for brainwashing, psychological coercion techniques were crudely employed to break the men down over time. Extended periods of solitary confinement, sleep deprivation, and sensory overload through music were the most successful techniques for inducing regression.

Music acted as both the mechanism and the message of indoctrination. As the excessive volume of the loudspeakers superseded thought processes, propaganda messages sought to override individual thoughts. However, Vietnam’s attempts to brainwash the POWs generally failed because the messages did not coincide with the torturous music. American anti-war songs featured discouraging lyrics, but the familiar sounds had no negative effects on the prisoners’ autonomy. Vietnamese music assaulted their identities, but the unintelligible words of another language held no significant meaning. The prisoners were broken by the painful conglomeration of noise, yet no alternative ideas for encoding were offered at that time. In their weakened state, the
POWs supported each other, thereby reaffirming their shared values with deeper conviction.

Vietnam’s attempts to demoralize the prisoners with sentimental songs from home were also misguided. By playing music that would make the POWs homesick, lonely, and nervous, the Vietnamese would force the prisoners to look inward rather than think of themselves as a group, thereby destroying the powerful bond which helped them resist. Their plan had the opposite effect, however, since the captors underestimated the power of familiar music to bring comfort despite the disheartening themes. John Dramesi was ready to give up when music brought him back to life. He wrote, “Someone in the compound began to play Western music. It was Nancy Sinatra singing. Training, discipline, and physical strength were on the verge of failing. It was the woman, Nancy Sinatra, at that critical moment who kept me loyal to my purpose.” Three quarters of my interview subjects still had an emotional reaction to songs they heard on Radio Hanoi, but they were quick to point out that those reactions were positive.

The main factors in whether someone perceives music as pleasure or pain are his control over the music and his understanding of the music. Predictability and meaning in music tend to soothe and comfort while the erratic and incomprehensible sounds of another culture’s music arouse the nervous system and activate the fight-or-flight mechanisms. The only lasting negative reactions the POWs reported involved a single instrument, but the vitriol towards the đàn bầu was potent. The mere thought of that instrument of torture got their blood boiling. Several men claimed that their only undying hatred and bitterness regarding their captivity was aimed at the traditional one-string

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instrument. The fact that the đàn bàu still evoked the same emotions decades later reveals the severity of the reactions it caused. Thirty-five percent of the POWs I interviewed found Vietnamese music so painful that it affected their ability to survive. In a prison where they faced the real possibility of death every day, the POWs feared the sound coming out of their speakers.

Music of other cultures, especially those using different tonal patterns, cannot be interpreted by the brain, leading to an overwhelming sense of confusion and helplessness. Initial exposure to this music while already under distress can cause physical pain and illness. POWs without previous exposure to Vietnamese music claimed that the incomprehensible noise coming from the speakers was worse than any other torture, but POWs who were familiar with Vietnamese music before their capture were not physically or psychologically damaged by it. Sufficient training in the music of potential enemies during SERE could allow soldiers to survive legitimate noise torture relatively unscathed.

For the Vietnam POWs, positive musical experiences canceled out the negative, healing the pain caused by music torture and preventing long-term psychological damage. Mentally taking control of their environment and reinterpreting music to fit their personal narrative could determine whether they perceived the music as pain or pleasure. Even when performing for a propaganda event, the POWs who performed reluctantly after torture were devastated by the experience, but the prisoners who knowingly participated with ulterior motives thrived. Those who actively sought to outwit the enemy could repurpose any song, photo op, or meeting to fit their needs. Bob Flynn’s parodies of the Communist propaganda songs played in his Chinese prison cell were a celebration of a
free mind and a survival tool. He drew strength from the knowledge that he was fooling his captors and from the anti-Communist message he sang.

From capture to release, and from solitary to Camp Unity, music provided immeasurable support—mentally, emotionally, spiritually, relationally, and tactically. Faith and music were undeniably intertwined in the minds of the POWs, and their beliefs in God and country were celebrated in song. In a constant battle with loneliness and boredom, a prisoner regained a semblance of control by following a daily routine. Singing hymns to himself helped fill the time while reinforcing his faith and combatting the solitude.

When isolation threatened to crush their spirit, the POWs used music to connect with each other. They learned that a musical phrase could lift a fellow soldier from despair. Simply whistling reminded the others that they were not alone and allowed the prisoners to identify themselves. The weekly church call in solitary strengthened and unified the prisoners through the concrete walls as they softly whistled “The Lord’s Prayer” in unison.

They demonstrated the magnitude of expressing their faith through music when they assembled in the large cells of Camp Unity. While the first priority for Vietnam was always propaganda, the first priority for the Americans was church, so they immediately planned services. They could have easily preached sermons, recited scriptures, and offered prayers without interference, but they insisted on traditional ceremonies led by choirs. The music was the most important element for their mental health and unity, providing an outlet for frustration and emotional support.
The POWs made a conscious and unanimous choice to fight for church services, fully aware of the risks. Rifles and bayonets could not silence them, and the Church Riot went down in history as the battle that was fought and won with song. SERE courses adopted the principles of faith based on suggestions from the Vietnam POWs, but the use of music in the practice of faith is strangely absent. This group that risked punishment and death multiple times for the chance to sing surely knew the power music carried when coupled with faith.

The POWs learned that their captors were terrified by their singing, and they discovered that joining together behind a cause could bring change. Once the prisoners had won the right to sing, they could add music to every activity, flaunting their new power in front of the Vietnamese. They provided nightly entertainment for their cellmates, from commercials with original jingles to full-length musicals. When they needed more mental stimulation, they created their own education system, and seventy-six percent of the interview subjects participated in music courses. After years of reading and hearing nothing but Communist propaganda, the prisoners could learn a subject of their choice. These activities helped the POWs prepare for life outside of prison, keeping their minds sharp and reminding them to remain hopeful for the future.

Without access to pencils or paper, the prisoners had no way to chronicle their experiences, so many of them told their stories through songs. These were often parodies of popular songs, but a few musicians created original compositions. Singing of their traumas was therapeutic and helped them heal their emotional wounds. For the dedicated Music Man, composing music was his lifeline, and he constantly risked punishment to
write choral arrangements and share them with all the choirs. Several interview subjects expressed their gratitude for his talents, hard work, and efforts to boost morale.

A great many POWs have expressed how the musical talents of a particular prisoner helped them through a difficult time. This is a consistent theme throughout books, articles, and interviews. The memory of another man’s voice could instantly bring the POW to tears, not because he was reliving the terror of long ago, but because he was thankful for the gift of strength and encouragement he received through song. He knew that one man and one stanza saved his life. Eighty-six percent of the men I interviewed believed that music aided in their survival. No other art form could boast that kind of impact. Only faith (in God, country, family, and other prisoners) received more credit.

The experiences of the Vietnam POWs provide a unique opportunity to study the positive and negative influences of music in tandem. As the victims of music torture, the prisoners consistently turned to music as a healing, empowering, and unifying force. The number who saw music as an aid to survival far outweigh those who saw it as a hindrance. Surprisingly, every prisoner who thought music made it harder to survive also claimed music helped them survive. Their reliance on music suggests that the trauma of torture can be healed through music. While they have not forgotten the pain caused by Vietnamese music, they do not dwell on it. They have placed their positive memories of music before the negative. I believe they accomplished this by reclaiming music as a group and using it to express their faith and hope through their unprecedented bond.

The former Guantánamo Bay detainees suffered lasting psychological damage such as PTSD and agoraphobia. American POWs, on the other hand, returned to America generally well-adjusted and whole. A majority of the prisoners saw significant positive
changes in themselves as a result of their captivity. None of them required a soundproofed house or discarded their TVs and radios to escape the noise.

When the POWs were released in 1973, their homeland expected to see “scarred and wounded men who were a flashback away from violence,” as they had been portrayed in movies. Instead, the former prisoners beamed with gratitude and expressed an intense love of God, family, and country. After nearly a decade of “cynicism and condemnation” against the war, Americans could agree on one thing. They united around the POWs and suddenly patriotism was back in fashion.

Every news outlet carried their stories of faith and forgiveness, as the POWs repeated laments for their former captors. Edward Hubbard explained, “Those of us who were locked up behind bars were actually the free people in that prison. The men on the outside with the guns and the keys are still there. Those people have been imprisoned for life because their minds have been captured. Ours are still free.” James Denton recalled how his father wept openly, “My heart went out to them because they live such miserable and impoverished lives.” The former prisoners found this compassion for the

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12 John M. McGrath, Prisoner of War: Six Years in Hanoi (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1975), viii.


Vietnamese while singing “You’ll Never Walk Alone” during their last Hanoi church service.\textsuperscript{16} As they thanked God for their impending release, they realized that their captors could never escape. The POWs released their anger and bitterness with every note, freeing themselves to move on.

No one can definitively say why the POWs fared better than many of their uncaptured counterparts. The invitational hymn exists because one song at one church service can inspire a change of heart, so it is possible that the men collectively forgave their captors before they left. Another theory is that each POW was thoroughly debriefed before returning home, which acted as a form of talk therapy, whereas many Vietnam veterans never discussed their experiences.\textsuperscript{17} While I suspect this contributed to the former prisoners’ mental stability, I believe their altruistic methods of survival ultimately altered their mindsets, reordering their priorities to others over self, honor over pride, and God/country over life.

Faith in one another often gave them strength to keep going, as there was “a genuine bond of love between them.”\textsuperscript{18} Richard Garrett surmised, “Ultimately, some strange combination of pride and obligation to his country/fellow POWs was capable of


\textsuperscript{17} Giles Norrington reported that “talking about what happened was an extremely helpful, purging experience,” prompting the Navy to include the importance of debriefing in survival training. Naval Education and Training Professional Development and Technology Center, “Captivity: The Extreme Circumstance (Nonresident Training Course),” U.S. Navy, https://archive.org/stream/USNavyCourseAviationMaintenanceRatingsNAVEDTRA14022US%20Navy%20course%20-%20Captivity%20-%20The%20Extreme%20Circumstance%20NAVEDTRA%2014316_djvu.txt (accessed January 23, 2020).

extending the limit of his endurance.”\textsuperscript{19} Mo Baker understood, “Their use of force did not pit one prisoner against the other but inadvertently caused an increasing comradery among the prisoners, an increasing desire to stand up for the principles of democracy and an increasing desire to return home with honor.”\textsuperscript{20}

The prisoners were tortured every time they were caught communicating, but nothing could stop these men from risking their own lives for their countrymen. They regularly put other prisoners above themselves in a unique cycle of sacrifice. They took torture to protect a man whose face they had never seen. The bonds built through the prison walls grew stronger with every selfless act, forming a cohesive unit of compassion.

Garrett concluded, “Prisoners of war, like trade unionists, are at their most impressive when they are massed together. The Vietnamese, doubtless, acted sagely, if inhumanely, by keeping them separated.”\textsuperscript{21} I disagree, however, because the separation was the foundation of their connection. If they had started out in larger cells, the leaders would have had no reason to organize the camp as a whole. Each group could have formed its own policies and beliefs, which could have led to more collaboration with the enemy. By separating the prisoners, the Vietnamese forced the Americans to unify with a “one for all, all for one” mentality. Believing that the person tapping on the wall has your back might be the only thing that keeps you going. Faith in an unseen being who loves and cares for you did not only apply to religion for the POWs. Their extreme patriotism


\textsuperscript{21} Garrett, \textit{P.O.W.}, 226.
fused with their religious beliefs as they put their faith in others simply because they were American. Then their faith in God, country, and each other grew stronger with every song they sang.

I have observed this compassionate attitude in every POW I have met, but I have witnessed these noble qualities every day in my own father. His increase in faith was evident to my mother during their first phone call after release. She told the news, “He’s gotten a little more religious and I think I have too.” He expressed his faith through music by leading the church services in his cell block and then singing in the church choir back home. His humility is clear every time he speaks about his experiences, as he always credits God with his survival. In his most intense moment of captivity, as bombs shook the ground and he feared for his life, he sang “The Lord’s Prayer” and found that “God pushed the mute button” on everything happening around him. As a victim of music torture, he continues to love music, and that one experience probably explains why. Music freed his soul from the dungeons of Vietnam.

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## Appendix A

### POWs Returned Alive

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Sullivan, Timothy Bernard
Sumpter, Thomas Wrenne
Sweeney, Jon M
Swindle, Orson George III
Tabb, Robert Ernest
Talley, Bernard Leo
Talley, William H
Tangeman, Richard George
Tanner, Charles Nels
Tellier, Dennis A
Temperley, Russell Edwin
Terrell, Irby David
Terry, Ross Randle
Tester, Jerry Albert
Thomas, William E
Thompson, Dennis L
Thompson, Floyd James
Thompson, Fred N
Thornton, Gary Lynn
Thorsness, Leo Keith
Tinsley, Coy R
Tomes, Jack Harvey
Torkelson, Loren H
Trautman, Konrad Wigand
Triebel, Theodore W
Trimble, Jack R
Tschudy, William Michael
Tyler, Charles Robert
Uetcht, Richard W
Uyeyama, Terry Jun
Vanloan, Jack Lee
Vaughan, Samuel R
Vavroch, Duane P
Venanzi, Gerald Santo
Vissotzky, Raymond Walton
Vogel, Richard Dale
Vohden, Raymond Arthur
Waddell, Dewey Wayne
Waggoner, Robert Frost
Waldhaus, Richard G
Walker, Hubert C
Walker, Michael James
Wallingford, Kenneth
Walsh, James P
Waltman, Donald G
Wanat, George K Jr
Ward, Brian H
Warner, James Hoie
Watkins, Willie A
Weaver, Eugene
Webb, Ronald John
Wells, Kenneth
Wells, Norman Louross
Wendell, John Henry
Wheat, David Robert
White, Robert Thomas
Wideman, Robert Earl
Wieland, Carl T
Wilber, Walter Eugene
Williams, James W
Williams, Lewis Irving
Willis, Charles E
Wilmuth, Floyd A
Wilson, Glenn Hubert
Wilson, Hal K
Wilson, William W
Winn, David William
Wolfkill, Grant
Womack, Sammie Norman
Woods, Brian Dunstan
Woods, Robert Deane
Writer, Lawrence Daniel
Young, James Faulds
Young, John Arthur
Young, Myron A
Yuill, John H
Ziegler, Roy Esper II
Zuberbuhler, Rudolph U
Zuhoski, Charles Peter
Zupp, Klaus H
Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. What is your musical background?

2. Did you write any music while in prison?

3. Did you participate in any church services?

4. Did you sing while in solitary confinement?

5. Did you perform for the camp radio or any Vietnam-sponsored events?

6. Did you participate in or witness any musical entertainment?

7. Did you take part in any musical education (vocal or instrumental instruction, music appreciation courses, etc.)?

8. Did you obtain or fabricate any musical instruments?

9. Did you have a loudspeaker in your cell or within audible range?

10. Do you remember any of the music played over the speakers?

11. Did any of that music affect you, emotionally or otherwise?

12. If you hear those songs today, do they still have the same effect?

13. Did you ever communicate through music (whistling, singing, etc.)?

14. Did you use the tap code to communicate?

15. Did you ever recognize words in sounds that were not tapped?

16. Could you still use the tap code today?

17. Did you participate in or witness the Church Riot of 1971 in Camp Unity?

18. Did you celebrate Christmas with music?

19. Do you think music helped you survive (by providing emotional support, passing the time, or helping you connect with God or other prisoners, for example)?
20. Do you think music made it harder to survive (by causing homesickness, flooding your cell with propaganda, or blasting your ears with a dangerously high volume, for example)?
# Appendix C

## Interview Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>“Yes” Responses</th>
<th>Total Respondents</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Musician before capture</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composed music in captivity</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt music aided survival</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>86</td>
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<tr>
<td>Felt music had a negative impact</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>35</td>
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<tr>
<td>Felt irritated by Vietnamese music</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used music in church services</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sang while in solitary confinement</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Performed for the camp radio</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Performed for Vietnam-sponsored event</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated in music education</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Played or fabricated instruments</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated in or witnessed Church Riot</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>60</td>
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<tr>
<td>Celebrated Christmas with music</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Had a loudspeaker in cell</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Remembered music from loudspeaker</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotionally impacted by that music</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>91</td>
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<tr>
<td>Still affected by that music</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>73</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communicated via music</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>42</td>
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Appendix D

Songs Used in Worship and Christmas Celebration

Worship:
Amazing Grace
Ave Maria
Battle Hymn of the Republic
Come, Come, Ye Saints
Count Your Blessings
Doxology
Ere You Left Your Room This Morning
Eternal Father
Give Me Your Tired, Your Poor
God Bless America
Hear Our Prayer, O Lord
He’s My Friend
Holy, Holy, Holy
How Great Thou Art
In the Garden
It May Not Be on the Mountain Height
Lead Me, Guide Me
Leaning on Jesus
Lord is in His Holy Temple, The
Lord’s Prayer, The
Master, the Tempest Is Raging
Nearer My God to Thee
Old Rugged Cross
Onward Christian Soldiers
Praise God from Whom all Blessings Flow
Ring Them Golden Bells for You and Me
Rock of Ages
Star-Spangled Banner
This Is My Country
We’ve Come This Far by Faith
What a Friend We Have in Jesus
What Is America to Me?
When I’ve Gone the Last Mile of the Way
Whispering Hope
You’ll Never Walk Alone
Christmas:
Adeste Fidelis
Away in the Manger
Hark, the Herald Angels Sing
I’ll Be Home for Christmas
It Came Upon the Midnight Clear
Jingle Bells
Joy to the World
Little Town of Bethlehem
O Come, O Come, Emmanuel
O Tannenbaum
Oh Holy Night
Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer
Silent Night
Silver Bells
Twelve Days of Christmas
We Three Kings
We Wish You a Merry Christmas
White Christmas
Winter Wonderland
### Appendix E

**Songs Used as Torture/Propaganda**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Composer/Artist</th>
<th>Song</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alpert, Herb &amp; The Tijuana Brass</td>
<td>Spanish Flea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymous</td>
<td>Every Day, the Movement’s Getting Stronger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armstrong, Louis (Satchmo)</td>
<td>What a Wonderful World and others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baez, Joan</td>
<td>We Shall Overcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baez, Joan</td>
<td>The Green, Green Grass of Home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bare, Bobby</td>
<td>Detroit City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beatles, The</td>
<td>Hard Day’s Night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beethoven, Ludwig Van</td>
<td>Symphony No. 3 (Eroica)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bennett, Tony</td>
<td>September Song and others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bennett, Tony</td>
<td>I Left My Heart in San Francisco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brown, James</td>
<td>James Brown’s Funky Christmas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burdon, Eric and the Animals</td>
<td>We Gotta Get Out of this Place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cantrell, Lana</td>
<td>I’ll Be Home for Christmas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carly Simon</td>
<td>Anticipation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cash, Johnny and June Carter</td>
<td>Jackson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Song Title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles, Ray</td>
<td>What’d I Say?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chico (of Cuban Program)</td>
<td>Spanish-sounding songs on organ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chopin</td>
<td>Piano Music</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clark, Petula</td>
<td>Downtown</td>
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<td>De Geyter, Pierre</td>
<td>Communist Internationale</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dvořák, Antonín Leopold</td>
<td>Violin Concerto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dylan, Bob</td>
<td>Lay, Lady, Lay</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dylan, Bob</td>
<td>Blowin’ in the Wind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dylan, Bob</td>
<td>The Times, They are a Changing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dylan, Bob</td>
<td>A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dylan, Bob</td>
<td>It Ain’t Me, Babe</td>
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<tr>
<td>East German Philharmonic Orchestra</td>
<td>The Orange Blossom Special</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fisher, Eddie</td>
<td>[Series of records]</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fitzgerald, Ella</td>
<td>Don’t Fence Me In</td>
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<tr>
<td>Francis, Connie</td>
<td>I Almost Lost my Mind</td>
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<tr>
<td>Franklin, Aretha</td>
<td>Respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frederick, Bill</td>
<td>Hey, Hey L.B.J.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Artist</td>
<td>Song Name</td>
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<tr>
<td>------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fredrick, Bill</td>
<td>And Freedom, Too</td>
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<tr>
<td>Garland, Judy</td>
<td>Somewhere Over the Rainbow</td>
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<tr>
<td>George Gershwin</td>
<td>Rhapsody in Blue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hall &amp; Oates</td>
<td>Have I Been Away Too Long?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane Fonda et al.</td>
<td>Fuck the Army!</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jones, Tom</td>
<td>Delilah</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kingston Trio, The</td>
<td>Where Have All The Flowers gone?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lennon, John</td>
<td>Give Peace a Chance</td>
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<tr>
<td>London, Julie</td>
<td>Love Letters</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lưu Hữ Phước</td>
<td>Thanh Niên Hành Khúc (South Vietnam National Anthem)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mantovani Orchestra</td>
<td>Various Songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McGuire, Barry</td>
<td>Eve of Destruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McKenzie, Scott (Also sung by Oriental group)</td>
<td>If You’re Going to San Francisco</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mussorgsky, Modest</td>
<td>Pictures at an Exhibition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy Sinatra and Lee Hazelwood</td>
<td>Fairy Tales &amp; Fantasies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ochs, Phil</td>
<td>Draft Dodger Rag</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paxton, Tom</td>
<td>Lyndon Johnson Told the Nation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Artist</td>
<td>Song</td>
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<tr>
<td>------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peter, Paul and Mary</td>
<td>Blowin’ in the Wind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter, Paul and Mary</td>
<td>The Cruel War</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peter, Paul and Mary</td>
<td>500 Miles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter, Paul and Mary</td>
<td>Puff, the Magic Dragon</td>
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<tr>
<td>Platters, The</td>
<td>Smoke Gets in your Eyes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presley, Elvis</td>
<td>Various Songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price, Ray</td>
<td>For the Good Times</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seeger, Pete</td>
<td>Waist Deep in the Big Muddy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shore, Dinah</td>
<td>I’ll Walk Alone (Thru Every Christmas)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shostakovich, Dmitri</td>
<td>Symphonies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Simon &amp; Garfunkel</td>
<td>Cecilia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sinatra, Frank</td>
<td>Strangers In The Night</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sinatra, Frank</td>
<td>The House I Live in (That’s America To Me)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sinatra, Frank</td>
<td>This Town</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sinatra, Frank</td>
<td>There Used to be a Ballpark</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sinatra, Frank and Nancy</td>
<td>Somethin’ Stupid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sinatra, Nancy</td>
<td>These Boots Are Made for Walkin’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artist</td>
<td>Title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sinatra, Nancy</td>
<td>Long Time Woman</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sinatra, Nancy and Lee Hazelwood</td>
<td>White Summer Wine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>String-A-Longs, The</td>
<td>Wheels</td>
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<tr>
<td>To Hai</td>
<td>Ready! Open Fire!</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tương Vi (or Vy)</td>
<td>Nguời lái đò trên sông Pô-kô (Ferryman on the River Pô-kô)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tương Vi (or Vy)</td>
<td>Nguời con gái sông La (La River Daughter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tương Vi (or Vy)</td>
<td>Cô gái vót chồng (Cathedral Girl’s Husband?)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Ho Chi Minh’s Funeral Music</td>
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<tr>
<td>Văn Cao</td>
<td>Tien Quan Ca (“Marching Forward”) (VN national anthem)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Various Artists</td>
<td>Stormy Weather</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Various Artists</td>
<td>Danny Boy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Various Artists</td>
<td>The Little Drummer Boy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Various Artists</td>
<td>Ave Maria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaughan, Sarah</td>
<td>Tenderly</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>The Mountains and the Valleys Rise up Against the American Imperialists</td>
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<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>Pull Out His Liver</td>
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<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>Shoot Straight at the Aggressors</td>
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<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>Springtime in the Liberated Zone</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>I Asked My Mother How Many Air Pirates She Shot Down Today</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vietnamese exercise music</td>
<td>Môt hai ba bôn</td>
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<tr>
<td>Williams, Roger</td>
<td>Autumn Leaves</td>
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<tr>
<td>Williams, Roger</td>
<td>Till</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youyuan, Li</td>
<td>Dong Fong Hong (The East Is Red)</td>
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</table>
## Appendix F

### Songs Written by POWs

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Composer/Contributor</th>
<th>Song Name</th>
<th>Tune (if not original)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alcorn, Ray</td>
<td>Vibra Finger Jingle</td>
<td>Pepsi Cola Hits the Spot</td>
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<tr>
<td>Baker, Mo and Gene Smith</td>
<td>How Great Thou Art (additional verse)</td>
<td>How Great Thou Art</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bates, Rick</td>
<td>Dead Gomer</td>
<td>Teen Angel</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black, Art (Neil)</td>
<td>Original Drum Solo on camp radio</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brace, Ernie</td>
<td>Rats in the Thatch</td>
<td>Jimmy Crack Corn</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brunson, Cecil and Myron Young</td>
<td>Ballad of Sparrow 3, The</td>
<td>Last Kiss, The</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collins, Quincy</td>
<td>POW Hymn, The</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collins, Quincy</td>
<td>O Holy Night at the Zoo</td>
<td>O Holy Night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collins, Quincy</td>
<td>Air Force Academy Alma Mater song</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collins, Quincy</td>
<td>It’s Christmas Again in your Hometown</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collins, Quincy</td>
<td>Corn Cobs in August</td>
<td>Lilacs in June</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collins, Quincy</td>
<td>You’re Just a Prisoner of War</td>
<td>I’m Just a Prisoner of Love</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collins, Quincy</td>
<td>God Bless America (arr.)</td>
<td>God Bless America</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collins, Quincy</td>
<td>Lord’s Prayer, The (arr.)</td>
<td>Lord’s Prayer, The</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collins, Quincy</td>
<td>Star-Spangled Banner (arr.)</td>
<td>Star-Spangled Banner</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collins, Quincy</td>
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<td>----------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(My) Nancy (It’s Nancy, She’s My Girl)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collins, Quincy</td>
<td>If I Love</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Collins, Quincy</td>
<td>What Will I Do?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Collins, Quincy</td>
<td>This Is My Country! (arr.)</td>
<td>This Is My Country!</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collins, Quincy</td>
<td>Air Force Hymn (arr.)</td>
<td>Air Force Hymn</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collins, Quincy</td>
<td>O Holy Night (arr.)</td>
<td>O Holy Night</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collins, Quincy</td>
<td>Battle Hymn of the Republic (arr.)</td>
<td>Battle Hymn of the Republic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collins, Quincy</td>
<td>America, the Beautiful (arr.)</td>
<td>America, the Beautiful</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collins, Quincy</td>
<td>O Come, O Come, Emmanuel (arr.)</td>
<td>O Come, O Come, Emmanuel</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collins, Quincy</td>
<td>Anchors Aweigh! (arr.)</td>
<td>Anchors Aweigh!</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collins, Quincy</td>
<td>Marine Hymn (arr.)</td>
<td>Marine Hymn</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collins, Quincy</td>
<td>Air Force Song (arr.)</td>
<td>Air Force Song</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collins, Quincy</td>
<td>Caissons (arr.)</td>
<td>Caissons</td>
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<td>Collins, Quincy</td>
<td>In the Garden (arr.)</td>
<td>In the Garden</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collins, Quincy</td>
<td>I Believe (arr.)</td>
<td>I Believe</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collins, Quincy</td>
<td>How Great Thou Art (arr.)</td>
<td>How Great Thou Art</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collins, Quincy</td>
<td>Were You There? (arr.)</td>
<td>Were You There?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Composer</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Arrangement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collins, Quincy</td>
<td>Steal Away</td>
<td>arr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collins, Quincy</td>
<td>Go Down, Moses</td>
<td>arr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collins, Quincy</td>
<td>My Country, ’Tis of Thee</td>
<td>arr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collins, Quincy</td>
<td>Eternal Father, Strong to Save</td>
<td>arr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collins, Quincy</td>
<td>Fairest Lord Jesus</td>
<td>arr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collins, Quincy</td>
<td>Lord Is in His Holy Temple,</td>
<td>arr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Eternal Father, Strong to</td>
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<td>Holy, Holy, Holy!</td>
<td>arr.</td>
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<td>Back in the Saddle Again</td>
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<td>Twelve Days of Christmas (POW Version)</td>
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<td>When I Crashed in the Red River Valley</td>
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<td>My Name Is Robbie Risner</td>
<td>McNamara’s Band</td>
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<td>Schoeffel, Peter</td>
<td>Eternal Father, Strong to Save (additional verse)</td>
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