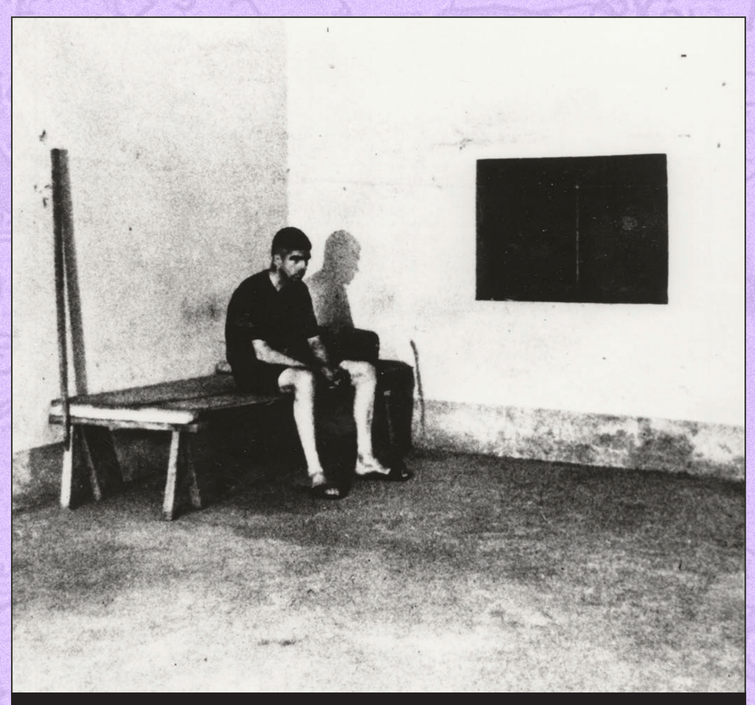
The POW Experience in the VIETNAM WAR

(Part 1 of 4)

Prisoners of war were paraded before North Vietnamese citizens. In this photo, U.S. Air Force Captain Murphy Neal Jones stands in the bed of a truck as he is paraded around Hanoi. He said "There was a bamboo pole about three feet back from the cab. I had to stand up holding on to that, and….And we took about an hour tour through the city." (Courtesy of National Archives)



U.S. Navy Lieutenant Commander Richard Stratton in his prison cell in North Vietnam. Stratton was shot down on January 5, 1967 and released on March 4, 1973. (Courtesy of National Archives)

And then a Viet [Cong] started beating my side of the bushes. And when he got in front of me he yelled. And I knew—the jig was up.

— Michael Brazelton

Introduction

While examining twentieth century U.S. Prisoners of War, Colonel R. J. Ursano, M.D., sagely remarked "There is no one POW experience." Vietnam War POWs made up a miniscule fraction of total war casualties. Of the roughly 2.59 million veterans who served in Southeast Asia, the U.S. Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency estimates 684 Prisoners of War returned alive and 37 more escaped captivity. Vietnam produced far fewer POWs than the Korean War or World War II, yet, for their part, Vietnam POWs experienced longer lengths of imprisonment. It was common for POWs to spend well over one or even two thousand days in confinement, equaling five or more years; several prisoners endured more than eight years in captivity. The majority were officers and downed pilots. U.S. POW returnees included 332 Air Force, 149 Navy, 121 Army, and 28 Marine Corps servicemen, in addition to 54 civilians. The following narrative is drawn from the recollections of POWs and their loved ones.

Capture

Capture marked the transition from freedom to imprisonment, and occurred violently over the span of a few brief and terrifying minutes. Tension, fear, uncertainty, and the pervasive knowledge that execution may be imminent defined this moment.

On August 5, 1964, Everett Alvarez thought to himself, "Good God. We're going to war. This is war. I mean, we're gonna go in and hit a base." Suddenly, his aircraft was hit. He thought, "Oh God. My poor wife. My mom. What are they gonna do?" He ejected and hit the water. Not long after, North Vietnamese soldiers pulled up in fishing boats. They all had rifles.

Parachuting to the earth, Joe Crecca saw an amorphous mass below him, a "black thing as a changing shape." As he drew closer he realized, "it's a horde of people…. and…actually they're moving towards where I'm gonna land." He thought, "I want my mommy."

Jose Anzaldua ran out of ammunition. "[My] M16 was gone, M79 rounds were gone, the grenades were gone, .45 rounds were gone." There he lay, his South Vietnamese Kit Carson Scout with him. Anzaldua had told him to flee, but the man refused. "And they just overran us," Anzaldua said. "They picked me up," he said, and his captors made both men lie in camouflaged fox holes, which completely concealed them underground.

Murphy Neal Jones staggered to his feet following his parachute landing. He had two pistols on him. As he looked up, he said it appeared as if 100 North Vietnamese soldiers were running toward him. "I cocked the pistol and levelled down." Then, the futility of the situation overwhelmed him. As one of the NVA soldiers came toward him, Jones accepted his fate and said, "I decided I wasn't John Wayne, and uncocked it, stuck the pistol butt toward him." He then attempted to raise his arms over his head. That's when he realized his left arm was broken. Jones was made doubly aware of the injury when another soldier came up and "put it in a hammer lock."

They stuck a knife up to Joe Crecca's throat. He felt the blade saw across his neck and a blanket of calm overtook him. "I thought, very matter-of-factly, they're going to cut my head off." Years after his release, physicians told Crecca, "You were going into shock." As it turned out, the blade was pointing away from his neck. "They were cutting my chin strap off."

The North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong frequently cut the POWs from their clothing using knives or machetes. They were unfamiliar with pilot's zippers and straps. Rather than unzip them, they cut them off. They also took the prisoners' boots; it was difficult to flee while barefoot.

Michael Brazelton felt the nylon tape stretch around his neck, and looked up at the giant oak tree above him. In another circumstance, the oak tree's sturdy branches might have provided comfort. Now, however, they loomed ominously. "They're gonna hang me," he thought. Next he felt a jerk on the rope. Curiously, "It wasn't a jerk up; it was a jerk forward." This was not a noose, but a leash. "They were leading me."

On the surface above the camouflaged foxhole he had been placed in Anzualda saw U.S. Marines who, unaware, "walked right over top of us." From inside the hole, soldiers armed with AK-47s flanked him on both sides. Once the Marines departed, Jose Anzaldua's guards chambered a round and put the AK-47 to his head. They demanded he walk or they would kill him. As evidence of their intent, they executed the Kit Carson Scout. Anzaldua was not sure he could stand. He had been wounded in several places during the firefight. He quietly sang the Marine Corps hymn. He got up and, step by step, Anzaldua walked to a prisoner of war camp deep in the jungle near the South Vietnam-Laos border. As weak and bad as his condition had left him, when Anzaldua saw the other POWs he gasped. "They looked absolutely emaciated. I mean—I knew they were Americans…. They were grinning at me." Anzaldua grinned back.

The Viet Cong often constructed their ad hoc prisons in South Vietnam under the jungle canopy to prevent U.S. pilots locating them from the air. Smoke generated from the camps ran through a lengthy underground pipe that slowly dissipated the vapors, fizzling them out before they rose high enough to be seen from the sky.

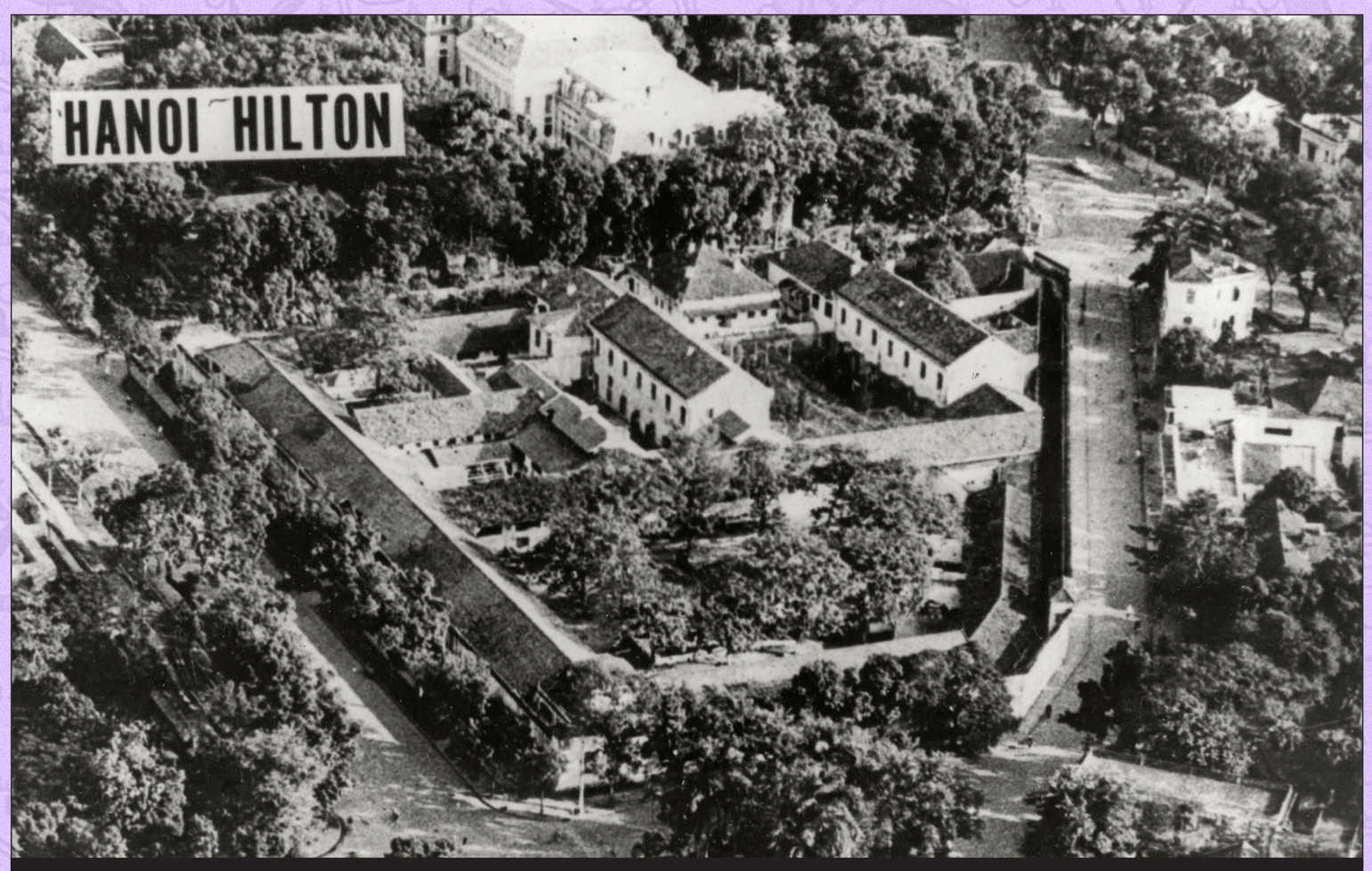
Many captured pilots downed inside North Vietnam were paraded in front of civilians before their incarceration. The prisoners were blindfolded and thrown into the back of a vehicle, and the North Vietnamese stopped "in every village and hamlet." Then, according to Richard Stratton the call went out: "They'd say, 'Hey, we got one. Come on out and have free whacks.'" Michael Brazelton had a similar experience, "They led me on a trail for 20 minutes or so until I came to a dirt road…. And a bunch of people were gathered around there. And they stood me in front of one of the jeeps. And the man in charge of the crowd started giving a speech…. They were brandishing some farm implements in the background, a machete occasionally. They were throwing mud at me." Civilians jeered, spit upon, and threw or swung objects at the prisoners. Here, before Vietnamese civilians, was proof of North Vietnamese strength and U.S. vulnerability.

Depending on where they were captured, prisoners were taken to jungle camps in South Vietnam or prisons in North Vietnam. The prisoners in North Vietnam named their detention facilities: "the Plantation," "the Zoo," "the Dog Patch," "Alcatraz," "Little Vegas." However, none were more famous than Hỏa Lò Prison, the "Hanoi Hilton."

U.S. Navy Seaman Douglas Hegdahl standing in the courtyard of a North Vietnamese prison holding a broom. Hegdahl fooled his captors into believing he was a person with an intellectual disability. He was released in 1969, and promptly informed U.S. military officials of the whereabouts and circumstances of more than 250 POWs in captivity (Courtesy of the National Archives)

The POW Experience in the VIETNAM WAR

(Part 2 of 4)



The Hanoi Hilton jail where American POWs were held captive. Following their release, the Air Force took aerial photographs of all North Vietnamese POW compounds: "the Plantation," "the Zoo," "the Dog Patch," "Alcatraz," "Little Vegas." (Courtesy of National Archives)

Torture was not our major enemy. Our major enemy was whiling away the minutes, the hours, the days, the weeks, the years.

— Eugene "Red" McDaniel

Imprisonment

To many who served in Vietnam, the war was a measure of time. Hours, days, and months became markers to track the deployment to its end. To the POW, the "end" existed both as an abstract and concrete goal. With their life's rhythms dictated by the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese, hunger, sickness, despair, resilience, inner strength, and their fellow prisoners accompanied them through the listless monotony of day-to-day imprisonment.

Conditions in South Vietnam jungle camps were worse than in the North's prisons. Prisoners were deprived of medicine and given little food, which usually consisted of rice and manioc (a starchy root similar to a yam). Faced with starvation, Jose Anzaldua decided, "Anything that I could find to eat I would eat, be it rats, bats, anything…to include maggots that were in ground toilet (sic)." Though their captors sometimes executed POWs, malnutrition and disease were the primary causes of death. David Harker recalled that he buried six POWs within a three-to-four-month period: "Cannon died…And then we buried Top next. And then we buried Bob Sherman. Then we buried William David Port. And then in November of '68 we…buried Edwin Russell Grissett, 1st Force Recon Marine. And then January 4th Fred Burns died. He was a Marine PFC, youngest guy—he was 18 when he was captured, he was 19 when we buried him."

Following his transfer from the South Vietnamese jungle camps to the North Vietnamese prison, Hal Kushner said, "I gained weight. . . .when I got to Plantation I weighed 44 kilos, which is like 90-some pounds. At the Plantation we got two meals a day: Hot water, a little piece of French bread, and this soup we called pumpkin soup….I mean, it was really a lot easier than the jungle. It was a jail….In the summertime it was 120 degrees and….In the wintertime is was cold and dank. But it was nothing like the jungle." The North Vietnamese rotated between pumpkin and cabbage soup every six months, and David Harker recalled occasionally the POWs received "canned meat from downtown. It was the People's Republic, so we had a little protein in our diet." Since North Vietnam needed the POWs as bargaining chips in peace negotiations, the prisoners sardonically referred to their dietary improvements as "gastropolitics."

In North Vietnam prison camps, a loud gong signaled wakeup and bed time. In the morning before breakfast, the POWs emptied their bucket and took a brief wash in filthy water. From there, Kenneth Cordier stated the prison's rhythms revolved around the "five Bs." Boards, a bare lightbulb, brick, a bucket and a box loudspeaker were all that made up their cells. The prisoners slept on crude boards without cushion. A perpetually lit lightbulb hung from the ceiling. The need for continual light owed to the brick from which the cells were made, which blocked out the outside world and with it, any natural light. The bucket served as the POW's toilet. The box loudspeaker piped in propaganda in the morning, afternoon, and evening. The recordings were written by the North Vietnamese Army and read by Trịnh Thị Ngọ, known colloquially as Hanoi Hannah. Her programs usually consisted of naming newly killed or imprisoned U.S. service members and playing popular anti-war songs in an attempt to persuade the imprisoned of the war's immorality.

With little to do in the hot summer months, most of the camp took naps in the middle of the day—including the guards. Prisoners were left to fill the long hours in their cells. Red McDaniel pondered in retrospect, "Can you imagine living in a vacuum for six years? The only thing we had was what we brought in in our hearts and our minds. And for the first time in my life, in captivity I got serious about academics….I learned some French, Spanish, German, some Russian; committed to memory some 65 different poems."

Kenneth Cordier made peace over a year into his ordeal."I was sitting on my board one day," he said, "And it just came to me like a revelation, the words 'This is your life. Make big things out of little things; do things in as much detail as you can; learn to communicate'….And above all, 'Be optimistic.'"

Torture

"We were war criminals. They told me that early on, and to forget about the Geneva Convention and stuff; that we were criminals and we would be treated as criminals," Hal Kushner stated. The term "criminal" filled the POW's throat with bile. The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese referred to them as Criminals of War, or "COW."

U.S. POWs were tortured. Those tortured recalled similar techniques and experiences. The earliest and most readily available evidence occurred in 1966 when POW Jeremiah Denton blinked out the letters T-O-R-T-U-R-E in Morse code while being interviewed for a propaganda film. Many POWs asserted that torture suddenly ceased in 1969 following Ho Chi Minh's death, though speculation still remains as to why the practice ended.

"You hear the guards coming. And you hear the jangle of the keys . . . . when it was your door, your throat just dropped. I mean, it just dropped to the pit of your stomach," Everett Alvarez stated. The POWs agreed to a code of conduct, Michael Brazelton recalled, "You just stand it as long as you can. And when you finally give up, you really give up. Your will is broken." Torture's purpose is to break the human spirit and gain intelligence; it is more efficient at the former than the latter. POWs frequently lied to their interrogators. "I made up the next targets," Richard Stratton stated. "I gave 'em the three targets that we were told that we would never be able to hit because there were Russians or Chinese there." Douglas Hedgahl convinced his torturers that he was unable to read or write. His captors renamed him "the Incredibly Stupid One" and he was given nearly free rein of the camp thereafter.

Illustrations of the rope torture technique, as drawn by Navy Captain Mike McGrath. (Courtesy of the United States Naval Institute)

Though there were several methods practiced, POWs strongly recalled "the rope" technique. Ropes pulled the prisoner's arms behind him to squeeze his elbows together in an unnatural position. The torturer then placed their foot between the prisoner's shoulder blades, and used leverage to draw their arms back. This placed intense pressure on the prisoner's lungs and shoulder joints, depriving them of breath and occasionally dislocating their shoulders. According to Kenneth Cordier, once you had screamed "loud enough and long enough..They'd loosen the ropes and resume the interrogation." Unfortunately, once the ropes were released, the pressure eased and blood rushed back into the prisoner's distended limbs and joints, which awakened the nerves and caused the intense pain to begin anew.

Prisoners broke. On his ninth day of torture, Murphy Neal Jones stated he "signed a written confession….And it said: I condemn the United States government for its aggressive war against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Two: I have encroached upon the airspace of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Three: I am a war criminal. And four: I have received humane and lenient treatment from the Vietnamese people and government."

Tap Code

Isolated from one another in individual cells, the POWs invented the "Tap Code" to communicate, stay resilient, and maintain morale. In sharp defiance of torture and interrogation, they brazenly transmitted the code to each other by carving it on the underside of the prisoner's side of the interrogation table. Everett Alvarez stated "Our interdependence on each other; tapping, using that tap code where you tap on the wall, keeping each other's spirits going; keeping each other aware of what's happening" defined their reliance on one another. Human connection, resilience, and dignity were maintained through taps and scratches against walls that separated and isolated them.

POWs were generally malnourished and denied access to medicine. Subsequently, illnesses became common throughout the camps. One such malady was known as "prickly heat." This condition was caused by blocked sweat glands, and owed its existence to the grime covering the prisoners' skin and Vietnam's stifling heat and humidity. In one instance, the POWs tapped out requests to communally join blankets and form a mat so the afflicted might sleep on a more comfortable surface. The prisoners passed the blankets during their brief periods together. When it became his turn, Kenneth Cordier tapped out: "When does this stop?" The response epitomized their morbid humor: "When it covers from your head to your toes."

Imprisonment became a test of wills between the powerful and the powerless. As David Harker noted, "It takes a lot of courage; but sometimes without the rifle it takes even more courage. And we found that out living in that POW camp. To be able to fight them without any weapons, just our mind and our words."

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

Following a prescribed introduction, POWs tapped out the row and column. Tap three times, pause, then two times for "M." Tap twice, pause, then four times for "I." Tap one time, pause, then three times for "C/K." Tap one time, pause, then five times for "E" to spell out "Mike." Just as with modern texting, tappers used shorthand for common expressions. The term GBU meant "God Bless You." (Courtesy of National Archives)

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Wives place American flags on the beds of returning prisoners of war. Divorce rates were significantly higher for POWs than other veterans. Most divorces occurred within the first year of return. (Courtesy of National Archives)

U.S. Navy Captain Robert Byron Fuller shares a moment with his wife, Mary Anne Fuller from his hospital suite. Mary Anne Fuller said, "For two years I lived in that limbo of saying 'if' instead of 'when.' When the next war starts, I hope that from the first day a man is shot down and captured, a picture of him runs in the newspaper once a week. So that prisoners don't come as a big surprise to the whole country five years after they have been shot down." (Courtesy of National Archives)

I feel like I'm in a vacuum, a spectator on life.

— Mary Anne Fuller

The Home Front

Following the moment their loved one was reported "Missing in Action," POW families entered a state of uncertainty. Many existed in suspended disbelief, forced to put logic and reason aside and face the unknown armed only with hope, faith, and what little information they gleaned from the U.S. government, the media, and the distant possibility of hearing from their loved one through letter writing. Lynda Gray, whose husband was imprisoned for more than six years, referred to this time as "The fear of hope." Eileen Cormier, whose husband was held for more than seven years, stated, "We're not divorced, not widowed, and we're not really married either." The war made prisoners out of loved ones as well.

"There is nothing to face," June Nelson stated. "You can't say he is dead and you can't say he is alive." The families had little to go on beyond that their loved ones were unaccounted for. "There often were simply too few facts to know whether the man was dead or alive," Alice Stratton stated. Stratton learned her husband had been shot down on January 5, 1967. Four months later she gained confirmation that he was a prisoner of war from an unlikely source, she spotted his picture in an April 7, 1967 issue of Life magazine. He appeared "drugged or brainwashed." The image devastated her. Subsequently, Stratton avoided the news.

Just as there was no single POW experience, the same applied to those at home. For her part, Virginia Nasmyth ceased waiting. After the U.S. Air Force listed her brother, John Nasmyth, missing on September 4, 1966, Virginia waited three years and heard little during that time. She wrote letters to an address she had been given but received no response. In the latter half of 1969, Nasmyth traveled to Paris to speak with the North Vietnamese and see if John was alive. The official she spoke with proved evasive. When she told him her letters went unanswered, he gave her a new address. Even if her brother was alive, he told her it would not be fair to give the prisoners back, because North Vietnamese people were losing their lives in the war. Apart from an address of dubious worth, the official was no help. It appeared she had made her trip to Paris in vain. By chance, she received a phone call a few hours later from her parents. Recently released prisoner Douglas Hegdahl, who had memorized the names, capture dates, method of capture, and personal information of roughly 256 prisoners to the tune of the nursery rhyme "Old MacDonald Had a Farm," had revealed her brother was a prisoner. After three years of uncertainty, Virginia learned John was alive.

Virginia Nasmyth's fierce desire to know the truth kept hope alive. In other cases, hope led to denial. Alice Stratton recalled, "I saw a man putting on his hat across the parking lot of the commissary store. That one characteristic gesture brought back all the intense longing and hurt with a painful rush of emotion, and I found myself running for a few seconds to get a better look." When she realized the man was not her husband, "[a]ll the tears of disappointment and sadness flowed again, as though I had only then heard the dreadful news of my husband's capture."

Wives were sent their husband's possessions. Some placed the items in their husband's spaces believing they might return home at any moment. Others found the artifacts too painful, and discarded them. Following her husband's capture, Andrea Rander stopped listening "to the tapes he made before he was captured. The other night my younger daughter wanted to listen to them. I suddenly realized she couldn't remember her daddy's voice." Lynda Gray reported she completed her grief a year following her husband's capture, and reconciled that he had been killed. When she discovered her husband was alive and returning home soon, she said "I've ordered all of his things out of storage. I don't know what he'd feel if he walked in here now. His clothes, his personal things aren't here. I want him to feel he belongs here, to see his old football helmet, his toy soldiers." Even personal letters took their toll. Eileen Cormier stated, "I'm lucky enough to get letters, and the military has furnished me with a complete analysis of my husband's mental health…. Three years ago they told me that he was deteriorating and wasn't going to survive—which I thought was really groovy," she sarcastically concluded.

After the first year, the "tears dried up," Stratton said, but "depression was always there, buried, perhaps, but there until the final resolution." As with the prisoners, loneliness became a companion while normalcy seemed a foreigner. "I had the worst times…when I was out with other couples. That was when I really felt alone," Nona Clarke reported. Like their imprisoned loved ones, "[w]e learned to cope with each day (or moment) at a time, became involved with helping each other and in our community" to get out of what Stratton called their "ghetto of unhappiness."

"People think the fact that your husband is missing is your only problem. They forget you are still living in a very real world and you have to put up with other very real problems," Irene Davis stated. Time marched forward and the mundane affairs of everyday life required tending, while even monumental achievements brought heavy emotion. "I think when we landed on the moon is when I went under," Eileen Cormier recalled, "because we can land on the moon, but we can't reach this man on the face of this earth." Nevertheless, she fashioned a new life out of the experience. "All right, my husband has been gone five years," she thought, "but have they been total wastes? Finally I was able to get my master's [degree], which I couldn't do [before] because we were always moving. Finally we have been able to save some money. Finally we have been able to get a home. You have to look for salvation in this." For her part, Mary Ann Fuller found salvation in her children: "I have them every night to fix dinner for, I have them to love. It must be so hard for my husband because he doesn't have them to touch," she said.

Certain aspects of the home front's experience mirrored that of the POWs'. Like the POW, families and loved ones found themselves suspended in time and, in particular ways, isolated from others. Hope, faith, resilience, community, and survival were their watchwords. As Lynda Gray poignantly noted, "Returned prisoners have told us that when you're captured, you decide whether you'll make it or not. Then everything goes toward that. The same thing is true for the families. I must survive."

A shot of the crowd at Clark Air Force Base, Philippines, as they wait for former prisoners of war to debark the C-141 Starlifter. (Courtesy of National Archives)

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Captain Allen Colby Brady holds "Today is the first day of the rest of your life," a gift presented to him by the Enlisted Wives Club members. (Courtesy of National Archives)

Hal Kushner shaking hands with Brigadier General Russell Ogan. Kushner later recalled that Ogan was "a big, burly Air Force brigadier general….the guy had breadth. He had meat on him. I mean, he had thickness that we didn't have….and he had plump grey hair that had tonic on it. And we were like all straw, our hair was straw." (Courtesy of Hal Kushner)

American service members cheer as the C-141 Starlifter takes off from an airfield near Hanoi. (Courtesy of National Archives)

Getting on that C-141 and having that feeling that you had descended into the dungeons…you've met the dragon, and you've won. You come home.

–Everett Alvarez

Reconciliation

On January 27, 1973, the United States and South Vietnam signed the Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam with representatives of North Vietnam and the Viet Cong. The ceasefire agreement stipulated the return of 591 POWs from South Vietnam and Hanoi, nine from Laos, and three from China. The Secretary of Defense named it Operation HOMECOMING. To retrieve the POWs, the U.S. sent C-141 transport planes to Hanoi, North Vietnam and a C-9A aircraft to Saigon, where POWs in South Vietnam were being ferried following their exchanges. The first flight of 40 U.S. prisoners of war left Hanoi in a C-141 later known as the "Hanoi Taxi." In total, 54 C-141 missions flew out of Hanoi from February 12, 1973, to April 4, 1973.

As the final days of their imprisonment drew near, food improved dramatically. The POWs reasoned their captors were fattening them up for public release. The prison guards came to them, gave them clothes, and told the POWs to "'put it on.'" Jose Anzaldua stated he was given a bag and told "'You're going home.'" He thought, "'Well, I ain't believing this.'" The clothes included "cotton slacks, a cotton shirt, a belt, and shoes," Kenneth Cordier said. "They looked like real shoes, but they were mostly cardboard….But they looked good." The bag was a "black AWOL bag," Hal Kushner recalled, "and it had things like Vietnamese cigarettes in it, Vietnamese toothpaste…little souvenirs."

"When we saw the hangars," David Harker remembered, "and saw that C-141 with the wings down on the ground…your heart jumps up in your throat." "One by one our names were called," Kenneth Cordier stated, and the men "stepped forward, and saluted the U.S. Air Force brigadier general." They were saluting Brigadier General Russell Ogan, who Hal Kushner described as a burly man with real meat on him, a stark contrast to the emaciated POWs. Ogan's officer assistants, according to Jose Anzaldua, told the newly freed men to "'walk very briskly to that airplane.'" Anzaldua added, "They didn't have to tell me twice." As Michael Brazelton walked to the C-141, an airman took him by the arm, and Brazelton joked in recollection, "like I was gonna go somewhere else!"

Each aircraft carried soda, cigarettes, cigars, candy, and other enticements. "They had these real cute flight nurses," Hal Kushner wistfully remembered, "I know they picked 'em. They were tall, all these tall girls… blonde, French twist haircuts." One of the flight attendants approached Kushner in his seat and told him, "'We have anything you want on this airplane. We have a soda fountain, we have cigarettes, we have cigars….What do you want?'" He asked for a Coke with crushed ice. Finally, the gears came up, and Kenneth Cordier described the moment as "Pandemonium….Boy, we were cheering and hugging each other and carrying on. It was really something." As the aircraft traveled skyward, Jose Anzaldua peered out the window at North Vietnam below. He said this was "the last time I ever saw North Vietnam. And I was glad. Very glad."

The aircraft flew to Clark Air Base in the Philippines, where a special wing on the top floor of the base's hospital was set aside for them. Over the next few days, they were provided medical treatment, reintroduced to regular food, briefed on their military benefits, and given a financial allowance to purchase any goods they needed at the Base Exchange, a retail store commonly found on United States military installations. From the hospital, the former POWs began reconnecting with the world as free men. Many POWs were unaware of the July 20, 1969 moon landing, or were unfamiliar with the concept of a "Super Bowl," as the first game had been played in 1967. Michael Brazelton approached a large bank of telephones. He was told he could call anywhere he wanted. As it turned out, he had been released within a day of his mother's birthday. When they spoke over the phone, he explained that he was sorry he "hadn't written her in a while…I've been tied up." They laughed.

More bittersweet and painful were the individualized files created for each POW. The records, according to Hal Kushner, "told you what happened to your family…guys lost their parents, and…their wives left 'em….in my case, I was very fortunate. My parents were still alive. I was still married. I had had a son. My wife had had a baby in April of 1968. And I knew that she was pregnant, but I didn't know if he was a boy or a girl; if he had been born; if he was healthy….the first time I met my son was the week before his fifth birthday." For others, the news served as a painful reminder that time refused to stand still during their incarceration. Everett Alverez stated, "When I finally got back eight-and-a-half years later, I had found out already that I was no longer married. She had remarried and had a family." U.S. military officers broke the news to Joe Crecca personally. "Your wife divorced you," they said. He was in complete shock. He asked when it happened, and they replied, "January, 1972." She had remarried. Crecca thanked the officers for their time when they stated, "that's not all of it…. Your father died."

Reflecting on the experience, Michael Brazelton stated, "Six years, seven months…. like the best years of your life. What years do you not want to be locked up? 24 to 31." Hal Kushner tried not to dwell on the lost years. He said, "I don't like to, you know, talk about the past. I want to look forward." True to Kushner's words, the former POWs set about shaping their lives and their nation's future as free men. Such was the greatest expression of their newfound freedom.

Conclusion

For all involved, the POW experience felt like a contradiction of time: while life marched forward for the rest of the world, the lives of POWs and their families were interrupted and paused. For prisoners, this suspension of time began with their capture. For those on the home front, it began with the arrival of a "Missing in Action" report. While Operation HOMECOMING brought resolution to the POWs and their loved ones, nothing could give back the days, months, and years lost. In the period of time between capture and reconciliation, loved ones anxiously hoped for catharsis. Some waited to see their loved ones again. Some did not. Still others wait to this day.

*As of this writing, the Defense Prisoner of War/Missing in Action Accounting Agency estimates a total of 1,588 Missing in Action from Vietnam. Of those, 34 are presumed to have died in captivity.