History of POWs in Vietnam

Naval aviators shot down over North Vietnam "accounted for 154 of the 600 Americans taken prisoner during the war."[1] Of these 154, 138 were released and returned to the United States in 1973, 2 escaped, 5 were released before 1973, and 9 died in captivity.[2] Prisoners were to follow Executive Order 10631, Code of Conduct for Members of the Armed Forces of the United States. Under this code, "a captured serviceman was required when interrogated to give only name, rank, service number, and date of birth; to resist further demands by all means available; to make every effort to escape; and to provide no information or statement harmful to comrades or country."[3]

With war never legally declared in Vietnam, American POWs were denied Geneva Convention protections. They "experienced torture, harsh interrogation, insufficient food, and poor or non-existent medical care."[4] Withstanding such conditions alone was nearly impossible so prisoners, although frequently isolated from one another, took extreme efforts to communicate and thereby maintain their humanity, unit cohesion, and chain of command.

Using methods collectively known as tap codes, POWs, who were forbidden to speak, "communicated by knocking, tapping a tin cup, or even coughing a set number of times for each letter of the alphabet.'"[5] To relieve oppressive loneliness, prisoners spent every possible moment tapping. Lieutenant Commander Porter Halyburton "'poured out [his] heart'" to Marine Major Howard Dunn "in between torture sessions. 'We talked about what the Vietnamese were doing to us, we talked about food, we talked about women, we talked about our past lives and what we wanted to do in the future. We tapped for hours.'"[6]

Tap codes also enabled resistance. Senior officers among the prisoners went to extraordinary lengths to resist by example, knowing that knowledge of their deeds would spread through the tap code. Leaders "were dragged before the media and pressured to make scripted statements condemning the U.S. intervention." Denied sleep for 72 hours and placed before TV cameras, Captain Jeremiah Denton still blinked out the word 'torture' in Morse code, giving U.S. authorities "the first indication that American prisoners were being abused." Captain James Stockdale "pounded his face against the wall until he was unfit to be photographed or filmed" and continued to hit himself to keep his bruises visible.[7]

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[1] *The Ten Thousand-Day War at Sea: The U.S. Navy in Vietnam, 1950-1975*, Norfolk, VA: Hampton Roads Naval Museum, 2020, 58.

[2] Stuart I. Rochester, *The Battle Behind Bars: Navy and Marine POWs in the Vietnam War*, Washington, DC: Naval History and Heritage Command, 2010, 1.

[3] Rochester, 23.

[4] HRNM, 58.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Rochester, 47.

[7] Ibid., 26.

Stockdale developed an additional conduct code, also spread by tap code, signified by the acronym BACK US, which outlined the following…

> B—Bowing. Do not bow in public, either under camera surveillance or where non-prison observers were present.
>
> A—Air. Stay off the air. Make no broadcasts or recordings.
>
> C—Crimes. Admit to no "crimes," avoiding use of the word in coerced confessions.
>
> K—Kiss. Do not kiss the Vietnamese goodbye, meaning show no gratitude, upon release.
>
> US—Unity over Self.[8]

Communication and acts of resistance facilitated by that communication reminded POWs of their collective humanity, duty to resist, and loyalty to each other, the Navy, and the United States.

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[8] Rochester, 24.