

“Life’s One Horror after Another for Sill Prisoners of War”

Lawton Constitution and Morning Press (Sunday September 24, 1967)

The mud-covered American GI stands on his head against the concrete block wall of the small, barbed wire enclosed prisoner of war compound.

A man in a foreign uniform bends over him, shouting into his ear:

“American pig! You’re going to tell me a story, pig, because you’re going to crack. I spotted you at 50 feet as a pig that would crack because I’m going to give you my personal attention until you do.

A short distance away, another prisoner is thrown to the ground and made to obey commands like a dog; others are jammed into a small dark underground pit; some are locked into a metal drum being beaten with a heavy club, and yet others are forced to raise and lower heavy logs or crawl through a mud hole on their stomachs. Vietnam? Korea? No

The scene is taking place on Fort Sill’s West Range. The cast of characters is composed of candidates and instructors from Fort Sill’s Officer Candidate School.

The future officers are being given a sample of the treatment they might expect if captured in Vietnam, and perhaps are gaining insight into their own limitations in resisting such treatment.

No punches are pulled. The grueling treatment is designed to break the candidates down both physically and mentally. Although rare, there have been candidates who have cracked under the pressure.

“The training has to be tough,” said Col. Marlin W. Camp, OCS commander, “In order to give the candidate an appreciation for what could happen to him if captured and dispel his fear of the unknown.

“Once a man has been through something once, he is better prepared the second time.”

As explained by Col. Camp, the techniques used in the training are similar to those used by Communists in Korea and Vietnam – techniques designed to exhaust a man physically, thereby giving the captors an easier access to his mind.

He added that due to the small number of American prisoners taken, little is known about how the Vietnamese Communists treat their prisoners, but that from the few reports available the treatment appears similar to that used by the Korean Communists.

This involves physically exhausting a man instead of torturing him, then, after he is exhausted, being nice to him in an attempt to indoctrinate or “brainwash” him into signing statements that could be used for propaganda purposes.

As to how the Viet Cong treats captured South Vietnamese is another matter, South Vietnamese Army officers, apparently useless for propaganda purposes, have been found with bamboo splinters driven under their fingernails and into their nostrils, shot to death.

“The course here must be a challenge,” Col, Camp said, “Most American soldiers feel that being captured is something that will never happen to them. We must make them realize that it could happen and give them some idea of what to expect if it does, so they might be better prepared to resist whatever treatment they are subjected to.”

The POW training here, termed the roughest of its kind in the Army is officially known as the “Escape and Evasion” Course. It has been in operation about a year and is administered to each class of candidates about half way through the 24-week training cycle.

It begins early in the morning. The candidates, many of whom will eventually see service in Vietnam, are first assembled for classroom instruction. They are briefed on escape and evasion tactics, and given maps of the escape and evasion course, which is located near Camp Eagle on Fort Sill’s West Range.

In earlier classwork, they have been told of the Geneva Conventions concerning the treatment of prisoners of war. If captured, they are told to never sign anything, and never to assist in torturing a fellow prisoner of war. They are required to give only their name, rank and serial number.

They are then divided into two groups and taken to the West Range and shown the boundaries of the escape and evasion course. This is required in order to prevent a candidate from possibly straying into a danger or Artillery shell impact zone.

They are told that they will be released near the south end of the 27-million square meter course and must make their way through an “aggressor” force to a “partisan” point located near Lake Quanah, then from there, on to a final destination point which is located at the north end of the course.

If they are not captured by the mock aggressor force, they are home free and won’t see the POW compound.

The candidates who know nothing of the POW compound other than the reports, some greatly exaggerated, which have filtered down to them through the school grapevine, are then trucked to the release point which has been ringed by a group of 30 to 40 aggressors drawn from school support units.

Here they are divided into five-man teams and given a final briefing. At a signal (from a) course instructor, they begin running for cover. Most are captured at this point.

Normally, out of a class of 100, only from three to 20 make it through the course without being captured.

Once captured, the aggressors run the candidates to the POW compound, a small concrete block structure with the sign "Welcome Xing Loi POW Compound."

Upon arrival, many of the candidates are smiling, thinking it is just another training exercise. They don't smile long.

First, they are made to lean against a log which has been suspended horizontally between two trees just outside of the compound, supported only by their fingertips. Here they are searched. Everything is taken except their ID cards, dogtags, Code of Honor card and wristwatch.

Their shoestrings have been tied together. The "Comrades" (OCS instructors) kick their feet from under them if they are not obeying fast enough, causing them to fall flat on their faces. "Get up pig!" they shout. "Get on your stomach, pig, get onto your feet, pig, faster, on your back pig, on your stomach, pig, on your feet, pig!"

No orders are ever spoken. They are shouted into the prisoner's ear.

The prisoners, under constant taunts from their captors, are made to crawl on their stomachs through a gate in the barbed wire enclosing the compound into a large room called the "bull-pen,"

Here a comrade shouts orders through a loudspeaker system, making them raise and lower heavy logs until they are exhausted. If a prisoner is not moving fast enough, he is shoved or dragged to a room containing a mud pit and thrown in. After he has been made to roll over in the mud several times, he is returned to the bullpen. The prisoners are then taken out of the bullpen and placed in isolation pits. One of these pits is underground, with only a small entrance hole. Some 15 prisoners are crammed into this pit, and the hole covered. They are removed from the pit after 10-15 minutes.

The other isolation pit is a metal drum that once housed an Honest John Rocket motor. About 20 candidates can be crammed into this container, and the drum is sealed shut. Another prisoner is made to beat upon the outside of the drum with a heavy club.

If a prisoner still shows signs of resistance, he is placed in stocks such as those that were used in colonial America. Here, the comrades shout in his ear, telling him he is going to die if he doesn't talk. Mud is poured on his head; his feet are kicked out from under him.

Sometimes a prisoner is picked as a collaborator. He is removed from the main body of prisoners, and the remaining prisoners are told that he has talked and is receiving fried chicken and lemonade as a reward. Actually, the isolated prisoner is being given another tour in the mud pit.

Occasionally a prisoner is selected and marched from the compound to a tent containing food and drink. He is spoken to in a friendly manner by a seemingly compassionate comrade who offers him food and something cold to drink. (A prisoner is never supposed to accept special favors).

Later, after the prisoners have been worn down physically, they are taken one at a time into a room where a sympathetic "Red Cross" representative speaks to them, asking them to sign a form which will be used to notify their next of kin that they are safe. Several of these forms have been forged with signatures of other prisoners and are left lying on the table in plain sight of the prisoner.

Occasionally, one of the candidates will sign this form. Later, he will be told that the signature could have been transferred to a document stating that the U.S. was involved in germ warfare.

After leaving the "Red Cross" station, they are again thrown in the mud pit, where they are further softened for the interrogation room, which is their next stop.

Here they are cajoled and berated in an attempt to get information from them. Next, they must crawl through a barbed wire enclosed obstacle course into a room containing a cable-suspended barrel.

They are placed headfirst into the barrel, and another candidate is made to spin the barrel and beat upon its sides with a club or rocks. This is an attempt to soften them up for the indoctrination room, their next stop.

In the indoctrination room, they hear discussions on the civil riots in the United States and the disparity between the incomes of the "owners" and the laborers, along with the other items of Communist propaganda. Next, they are taken to a small room containing sunken barrels partially filled with mud, in which they are placed headfirst and told to do pushups and "kiss the mud." From this room they are finally allowed to "escape" through a narrow 50-foot underground tunnel which leads to a small structure outside the compound. This is a safe area, free of aggressors.

After leaving the tunnel, they regroup into five-man teams and either hide in the woods until dark or start immediately for the partisan point, where they can wash up and eat. (breakfast was their last meal).

If they are caught by the aggressors, they will be returned for a second tour through the compound.

Upon leaving the compound, some of the mud-caked, exhausted candidates have said it could have been tougher, but these same candidates put up a pretty stiff fight if threatened with capture the second time.

They ignore the orders to halt given by the aggressors, whose rifles are loaded with blanks, and must be chased and physically wrestled to the ground. There have been a few black eyes and bloody noses.

All the candidates are expected to have reached the final destination by 4:30 a.m. the next day, when the problem officially ends. At 7:30 a.m., the candidates must be back in their classrooms.

Later, the candidates will attend a critique session in which they will be told of their mistakes, such as signing the “red Cross” forms, beating upon the barrels containing fellow prisoners, etc.

What do the candidates themselves think of the course?

“I think those who escaped without having to go through the compound were the unfortunate ones,” one candidate said. “it was rough, but I gained a lot.”

Note: This article was written by Victor Gaither, who along with a writer and photographer for the German magazine Neue Revue spent one day (during early September 1967) watching Fort Sill OCS candidates undergo the POW course.

