

# North Vietnamese Prisons during the Vietnam War

Members of the United States armed forces were held as prisoners of war (POWs) in significant numbers during the Vietnam War from 1964 to 1973. Unlike U.S. service members captured in World War II and the Korean War, who were mostly enlisted troops, the overwhelming majority of Vietnam-era POWs were officers, most of them Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps airmen; a relatively small number of Army enlisted personnel were also captured, as well as one enlisted Navy seaman who fell overboard from a naval vessel.

Most U.S. prisoners were captured and held in North Vietnam by the North Vietnamese Army; a much smaller number were captured in the south and held by the National Liberation Front (Việt Cộng). A handful of U.S. civilians were also held captive during the war.

Thirteen prisons and prison camps were used to house U.S. prisoners in North Vietnam, the most widely known of which was Hỏa Lò Prison (nicknamed the "Hanoi Hilton"). The treatment and ultimate fate of U.S. prisoners of war in Vietnam became a subject of widespread concern in the United States, and hundreds of thousands of Americans wore POW bracelets with the name and capture date of imprisoned U.S. service members.<sup>[1]</sup>

American POWs in North Vietnam were released in early 1973 as part of Operation Homecoming, the result of diplomatic negotiations concluding U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. On February 12, 1973, the first of 591 U.S. prisoners began to be repatriated, and return flights continued until late March. After Operation Homecoming, the U.S. still listed roughly 1,350 Americans as prisoners of war or missing in action and sought the return of roughly 1,200 Americans reported killed in action but whose bodies were not recovered.<sup>[2]</sup> These missing personnel would become the subject of the Vietnam War POW/MIA issue.

The US practice of handing over NVA and Viet Cong prisoners captured by Americans to the South Vietnamese military, where the abuse of such prisoners was commonly known, may have contributed to abuse of American POWs held by the NVA and Viet Cong as a means of retaliation.<sup>[citation needed]</sup>

## Phases of captures

On March 26, 1964, the first U.S. service member imprisoned during the Vietnam War was captured near Quang Tri, South Vietnam when an L-19/O-1 Bird Dog observation plane flown by Captain Richard L. Whitesides and Captain Floyd James Thompson was brought down by small arms fire. Whitesides was killed, and Thompson was taken prisoner; he would ultimately spend just short of nine years in captivity, making him the longest-held POW in American history. The first fighter pilot captured in North Vietnam was Navy LTJG Everett Alvarez, Jr., who was shot down on August 5, 1964, in the aftermath of the Gulf of Tonkin incident.<sup>[3]</sup>

American pilots continued to be captured over the north between 1965–1968 as part of Operation Rolling Thunder, the sustained aerial bombing campaign against North Vietnam. After President Lyndon Johnson initiated a bombing pause in 1968, the number of new captures dropped significantly, only to pick up again after his successor, President Richard Nixon, resumed bombing in 1969. Significant numbers of Americans were also captured during Operation Linebacker between May and October 1972 and Operation Linebacker II in December 1972, also known as the "Christmas Bombings". They would have the shortest stays in captivity.

## Severe treatment years



The "Little Vegas" area of Hỏa Lò Prison, built for American POWs in 1967.

Beginning in late 1965 the application of torture against U.S. prisoners became severe.<sup>44</sup> During the first six years in which U.S. prisoners were held in North Vietnam, many experienced long periods of solitary confinement, with senior leaders and particularly recalcitrant POWs being isolated to prevent communication. Robinson Risner and James Stockdale, two senior officers who were the de facto leaders of the POWs, were held in solitary for three and four years, respectively.

The 'Alcatraz Gang' was a group of eleven POWs who were held separately because of their particular resistance to their captors.

North Vietnam's treatment of American airmen shot down and captured over North Vietnam was a subject of controversy and concern throughout the Vietnam War. From the very beginning of the war, North Vietnam's stated position was that American prisoners captured in North Vietnam were "war criminals" who had committed crimes against the North Vietnamese people in the course of an illegal war of aggression and that therefore the American prisoners were not entitled to the privileges and rights granted to prisoners of war (POW) under the terms of the Geneva Convention.

The North Vietnamese refused to provide the International Red Cross with the names of Americans who were being held prisoner in North Vietnam and did not allow regular inspection visits by the International Red Cross to ensure that the prisoners were being treated properly in accordance with the terms of the 1947 Geneva Convention on POWs.



On July 6, 1966, 52 POWs (including Halyburton) were forced to march through Hanoi, where they were attacked and beaten by civilians.

On the morning of July 6, 1966, prisoners at "Briarpatch" and the "Zoo," two prisoner of war camps west of Hanoi, were rounded up in the morning and given shirts with numbers. In late afternoon, the gathered American prisoners, blindfolded and handcuffed in pairs, were loaded onto trucks and driven to a sports stadium in downtown Hanoi. The men from the two prisons, 52 in all, were addressed by a man nicknamed "Rabbit," an indoctrinator from the Hanoi prison of Hoa Lo. He told the American soldiers they were about to "meet the Vietnamese people."

Despite not knowing exactly what lay ahead, the men -- a dozen of whom had been in isolation -- were thrilled to see their comrades. The men communicated in code by tapping on their handcuffs. The joy of human contact ended when "Rabbit" barked the command to move out.

Red-scarved guards flanked the prisoners, who were marched two-by-two into a waiting crowd. Rabbit ordered the men to bow their heads, but U.S. Commander Jeremiah Denton and others passed the word to stand tall. The men were first led past the Soviet and Chinese embassies and then were brought down the city's main avenue, which was lined by a mob that one soldier estimated to have 100,000 people.

Before long, screaming spectators began breaking past the guards to hit, kick, and spit at the men. Bottles were thrown, and more than once the dazed prisoners were beaten to the ground. The brutal gauntlet extended for about two miles, an hour-long ordeal. As the prisoners were led back to the stadium, the attacking crowds broke into a riot.

In his book, *'With God in a POW Camp'*, survivor Ralph Gaither said he and another prisoner recited the 23rd Psalm the final 100 yards back to the stadium. Almost all the men sustained head and facial injuries, nursing loosened teeth, broken noses and swollen eyes; one even had a partial hernia. After another half-hour of terror, about the time it took guards to disperse the crowds, the men were loaded onto trucks and driven back to the two prison camps.

The event had been planned by the North Vietnamese to win support for their cause. It was staged to produce film footage that would convince the world that the American prisoners were war criminals deserving of derision. They expected that an angry yet orderly Hanoi crowd would be shown jeering shamed American soldiers. Instead, the footage, broadcast to the world, showed manacled prisoners trying to protect their dignity and safety under assault from a mob.

U.S. officials quickly condemned the march, noting it was another violation of the Geneva Conventions. U.S. officials also took the opportunity to condemn the North Vietnamese threat that they would try American prisoners for war crimes. The march was denounced internationally as well, as was the Communist threat of war crimes trials. Prime Ministers Indira Gandhi of India and Harold Wilson of Great Britain lobbied the Soviet Union to restrain the North Vietnamese. United Nations Secretary General U Thant registered his disapproval of the POW treatment, as did Pope Paul VI and the World Council of Churches.

After the criticism, Ho Chi Minh and the Communists pulled back on their threat of trials. The propaganda from the North took a decisive shift. Ho told visiting journalists that the "main criminals" were not captured pilots "but the persons who send them there -- Johnson, Rusk, McNamara -- these are the ones who should be brought to trial." Reaction to the march apparently changed North Vietnamese policy and no war crime trials were ever held. The march itself also drew attention to an issue that until this time had received scant notice from the press and even from the highest levels of the U.S. government: the treatment of American POWs in Vietnam.



A "tap code" of knocks and a "deaf mute" code of hand signals were the only ways POWs could communicate.



The POWs made extensive use of a tap code to communicate, which was introduced in June 1965 by four POWs held in the Hỏa Lò: Captain Carlyle "Smitty" Harris, Lieutenant Phillip Butler, Lieutenant Robert Peel, and Lieutenant Commander Robert Shumaker.<sup>[6]</sup> Harris had remembered the code from prior training and taught it to his fellow prisoners. The code was simple and easy to learn and could be taught without verbal instructions. In addition to allowing communication between walls, the prisoners used the code when sitting next to each other but forbidden from speaking by tapping on one another's bodies.<sup>[6]</sup> Throughout the war the tap code was instrumental in maintaining prisoner morale, as well as preserving a cohesive military structure despite North Vietnamese attempts to disrupt the POW's chain of command.<sup>[7]</sup> During periods of protracted isolation the tap code facilitated elaborate mental projects to keep the prisoners' sanity.<sup>[8]</sup>

U.S. prisoners of war in North Vietnam were subjected to extreme torture and malnutrition during their captivity. Although North Vietnam was a signatory of the 'Third Geneva Convention of 1949',<sup>[9]</sup> which demanded "decent and humane treatment" of prisoners of war, severe torture methods were employed, such as waterboarding, strappado (known as "the ropes" to POWs),<sup>[10]</sup> irons, beatings, and prolonged solitary confinement.<sup>[9][11][12]</sup> The aim of the torture was usually not acquiring military information.<sup>[11]</sup> Rather, it was to break the will of the prisoners, both individually and as a group.<sup>[11][13]</sup> The goal of the North Vietnamese was to get written or recorded statements from the prisoners that criticized U.S. conduct of the war and praised how the North Vietnamese treated them.<sup>[11]</sup> Such POW statements would be viewed as a propaganda victory in the battle to sway world and U.S. domestic opinion against the U.S. war effort.<sup>[11][14]</sup>



*POWs not only endured terrible living conditions and isolation, but also repeated torture and abuse from guards.*

In addition to extended solitary confinement, prisoners were regularly strapped down with iron stocks leftover from the French colonial era. Made for smaller wrists and ankles, these locks were so tight that they cut into the men's skin, turning their hands black.



POWs at the Hanoi Hilton regularly had their legs strapped in irons or stocks, leftover at the prison from the French Colonial era. The bindings were usually extremely tight, and cut into the legs, causing lacerations and infections. On top of that, soldiers were faced with a grim reality when it came to relieving themselves while being strapped to a bed, face up, for days on end - they had to do it as they lay and marinate in it as the rats and roaches crawled all over them.

Locked and with nowhere to move — or even to go to the bathroom — vermin became their only company. Attracted by the smells and screams, rats and cockroaches scurried over their weak bodies. Prisoners were forced to sit in their own excrement. They were also viciously beaten and forced to stand on stools for days on end.

During one such event in 1966, then-Commander Jeremiah Denton, a captured Navy pilot, was forced to appear at a televised press conference, where he famously blinked the word "T-O-R-T-U-R-E" with his eyes in Morse code, confirming to U.S. intelligence that U.S. prisoners were being harshly treated.



## TORTURE EXPERIENCES OF PRISONERS HELD IN NORTH VIETNAM

AF WELLS, JL MOORE, RE HAIN, RE MITCHELL, JM MCGRATH, ROBERT E MITCHELL CENTER FOR POW STUDIES

On the second of August in 1964, three North Vietnamese torpedo boats attacked the USS Maddox, a United States Destroyer operating in international waters in support of Covert Actions by the government of South Vietnam. This ill advised action resulted in trivial damage to the Maddox and severe damage to the patrol boats. There may or may not have been a second attack by torpedo boats on 4 August. At any rate in the professed belief that a second attack had occurred, President Lyndon Baines Johnson ordered an attack on docks and oil storage facilities in North Vietnam. This initial air strike was the first step in President Johnson's explosive escalation of this undeclared war. It also resulted in the capture of the first known American POW to be held in North Vietnam, Ed Alvarez. Before the end of the conflict 490 known prisoners of war would be held in North Vietnam. An unknown number were murdered prior to arrival at prison camps. The experiences of this group included malnutrition, general abuse and actual torture.

The most severe torture commonly used was the "rope trick". The victim's upper extremities were pulled behind him. Tight bonds were placed proximal to the elbows and the elbows were pulled together. The wrists were bound. The wrists were then pulled up and forward. This extended and adducted the shoulders far beyond the physiologic range of motion. The elbows were hyperextended. Wrists were lacerated and blood supply was compromised for prolonged periods. The ulnar nerve was especially vulnerable. The pain caused by this abuse was severe. Residual paralysis and sensory loss with paresthesias lasted for prolonged periods and in some is present today.



THE ROPES



THE RESULT

The use of the Ropes was extremely common in the group shot down prior to 1970. Apparently anyone not too badly injured to torture was tortured. It was much less common in the post 70 group.

Handcuffs were used for routine transport as well as abusively. Two types of handcuffs were used. The "Hell Cuffs" were ratchet types cuffs of the type used by modern police forces. These cuffs were closed very tightly to the point of skin laceration. Interference with circulation caused hands to "turn black". Nerve compression caused decreased sensation and paresthesias. Other cuffs were a type of manacle. These were cast metal and were not adjustable. They were apparently left over from the French Colonial Government and were sized for the smaller Vietnamese wrists. These are tight on a smaller American wrist. On the thicker wrist they could only be closed with force. This was done with results similar to the ratchet cuffs.

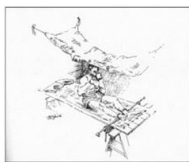


THE HELL CUFFS



MANACLES

The majority of persons captured prior to 1970 had multiple episodes of abusive cuffs. The majority captured after 1970 had no episodes at all. Non abusive use of handcuffs for transport are not included in these numbers.



A common form of torture was to require the prisoner to assume an uncomfortable position and remain in that position for prolonged periods. When the situation permitted and when no longer under observation, the prisoner would surreptitiously assume a more comfortable position. Discovery led to beatings and resumption of the position. The prisoners continued to resist in this manner and as they put it "I refused to torture myself".

Prisoners might be required to stand for prolonged periods of time, sometimes with hands raised over their heads. They were also required to kneel for long periods of time, again sometimes with arms elevated. Sometimes a pencil was placed under the knee to make it more painful.



KNEELING



STANDING

The majority of Pre 70 shootdowns had multiple episodes of enforced kneeling. It was much less common in the Post 70 group. Prolonged standing episodes had a similar distribution.

The North Vietnamese tortured their prisoners severely and over a long period of time. They starved them, exposed them to the extremes of heat and cold, denied them medical care, and abused their wounds. The external marks of torture were not obvious on their return to the United States. This concealed the fact of their torture experiences from a public eager to forget the war and led some persons to even deny that the torture had occurred. These tortures inflicted the maximum amount of pain with the least amount of obvious damage. The Robert E Mitchell Center collected data on the torture experiences of this prison population who were repatriated. It quickly became obvious that the larger group of prisoners could be subdivided into two smaller groups based on their date of capture. Persons captured prior to 1970 were treated much more harshly than persons captured afterwards. No one held in the North was captured in 1970.

Often they were required to sit for prolonged periods of time on a stool. Some times they were tied to the stool. A prisoner might be placed in leg irons, in the hogtie or chained to his cot. Urination and defecation were performed with great difficulty as the prisoner would have to slide and twist to the side of the cot while his ankles remained firmly secured.

A minority of the POWs were beaten across the buttocks with a fan belt or other form of whip.



THE STOOL

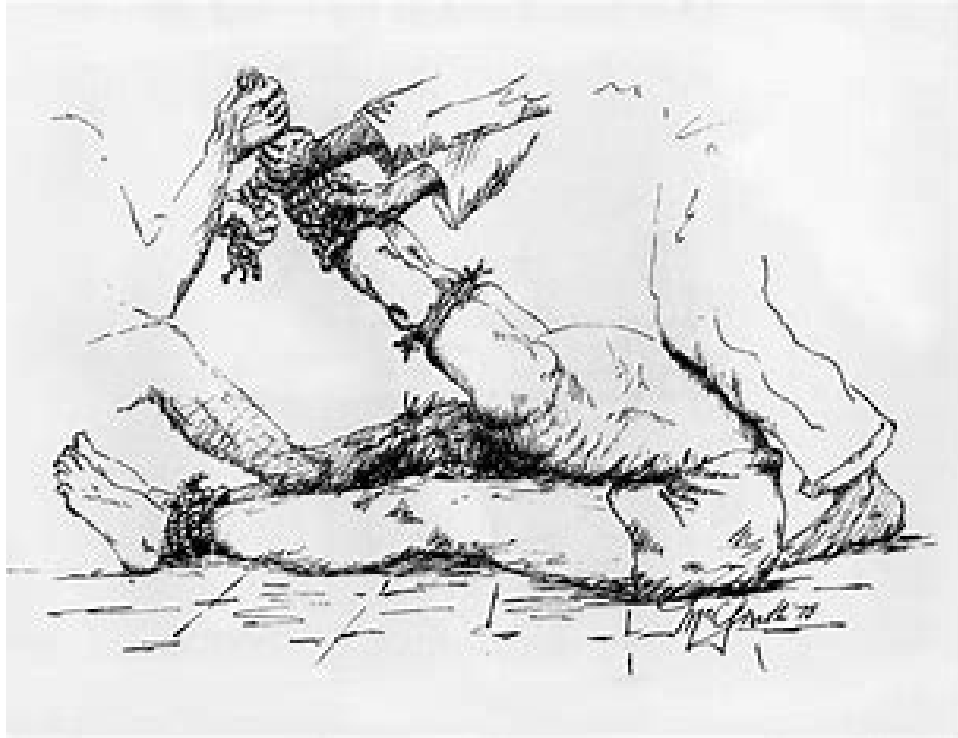


BEATING WITH FAN BELT



THE HOG TIE

Prolonged sitting on the stool was used in both shootdown year groups. It was more frequently used in the latter group as punishment for "poor attitude". Approximately 1/3 of the Pre 70 shootdown group was beaten at least once with the fan belt or some similar object. These beatings were extremely brutal. They essentially did not occur after 1970. Abusive leg irons (as illustrated in the hog tie drawing) were used in the majority of the Pre 70 group and rarely in the Post 70 group.



The Vietnamese rope trick was one of the most brutal methods of torture endured by American POWs at the Hanoi Hilton. The method involved binding the arms behind the back with rope then rotating them upward until the shoulders popped out of their sockets. Victims were sometimes strung from the ceiling like this and beaten as they hung.

The ropes were bound so tightly they cut off circulation, causing numbness and muscle spasms in the extremities that endured long after the POWs were repatriated.

Prisoner Sam Johnson, later a U.S. representative for nearly two decades, described this “rope trick” in 2015:

*“As a POW in the Hanoi Hilton, I could recall nothing from military survival training that explained the use of a meat hook suspended from the ceiling. It would hang above you in the torture room like a sadistic tease — you couldn’t drag your gaze from it.”*



*During a routine torture session with the hook, the Vietnamese tied a prisoner’s hands and feet, then bound his hands to his ankles — sometimes behind the back, sometimes in front. The ropes were tightened to the point that you couldn’t breathe. Then, bowed or bent in half, the prisoner was hoisted up onto the hook to hang by ropes.*

*Guards would return at intervals to tighten them until all feeling was gone, and the prisoner’s limbs turned purple and swelled to twice their normal size. This would go on for hours, sometimes even days on end.”*





POWs interned were hardly ever fed, as the Vietnamese used starvation as a form of torture. When they were fed, prisoners were given watery soup with human feces and/or rocks.

In the end, North Vietnamese torture was sufficiently brutal and prolonged that nearly every American POW so subjected made a statement of some kind at some time.<sup>[16]</sup> As one later wrote of finally being forced to make an anti-American statement: "I had learned what we all learned over there: Every man has his breaking point. I had reached mine."<sup>[14]</sup> Only a small number of exceptionally resilient prisoners, such as John A. Dramesi, survived captivity without ever cooperating with the enemy; others who refused to cooperate under any circumstances, such as Edwin Atterbury, were tortured to death. James Stockdale, fearing that he might reveal details of the Gulf of Tonkin incident if tortured, attempted suicide, but survived; he never revealed this information to the enemy.<sup>[17]</sup> Under these extreme conditions, many prisoners' aim became merely to absorb as much torture as they could before giving in.<sup>[12]</sup> One later described the internal code the POWs developed, and instructed new arrivals on, as: "Take physical torture until you are right at the edge of losing your ability to be rational. At that point, lie, do, or say whatever you must do to survive. But you first must take physical torture."<sup>[18]</sup>

After making statements, the POWs would admit to each other what had happened, lest shame or guilt consume them or make them more vulnerable to additional North Vietnamese pressure.<sup>[12]</sup> Nevertheless, the POWs obsessed over what they had done, and would years after their release still be haunted by the "confessions" or other statements they had made.<sup>[19]</sup> As another POW later said, "To this day I get angry with myself. But we did the best we could. [We realize], over time, that we all fall short of what we aspire to be. And that is where forgiveness comes in."<sup>[19]</sup> The North Vietnamese occasionally released prisoners for propaganda or other purposes.





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The POWs had a "first in, first out" interpretation of the 'Code of the U.S. Fighting Force', meaning they could only accept release in the order they had been captured but making an exception for those seriously sick or badly injured. When a few captured servicemen began to be released from North Vietnamese prisons during the Johnson administration, their testimonies revealed widespread and systematic abuse of prisoners of war. Initially, this information was downplayed by American authorities for fear that conditions might worsen for those remaining in North Vietnamese custody.<sup>[14]</sup> Policy changed under the Nixon administration, when mistreatment of the prisoners was publicized by U.S. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird and others.<sup>[14]</sup>

Hundreds of American POW's, mostly airmen, endured months of isolation and squalid conditions at Hỏa Lò. POWs were repeatedly interrogated and tortured at the hands of their captors and endured enormous levels of physical and mental abuse. The North Vietnamese guards strictly enforced no communication within the prison, but POWs found ways to communicate including a tap code that could be heard through walls from one cell to another and a "Deaf Mute" code of hand signals that could be used when guards were not looking. Even with this limited communication, prisoners developed a code within their ranks to look out for and protect each other in whatever way they were able.

## The History Of The Infamous Hanoi Hilton



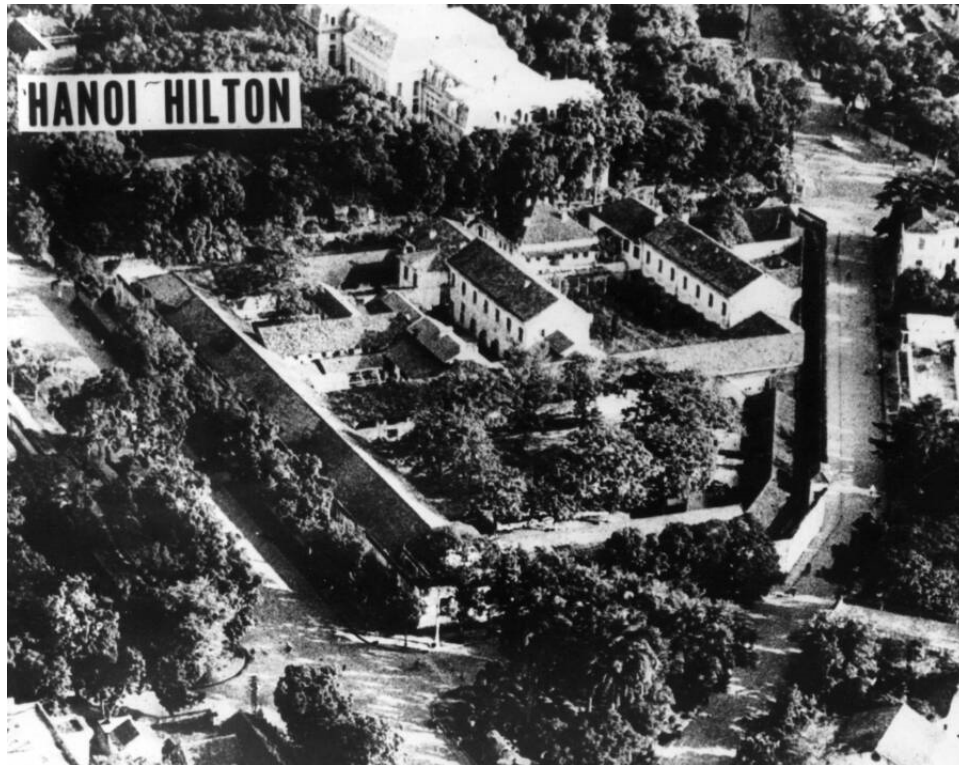
Hỏa Lò prison became synonymous with the POW plight during the War, and long after. American prisoners of war in the Hỏa Lò prison were subjected to extreme torture and malnutrition during their captivity. Although a signatory of the Third Geneva Convention of 1949, which demanded “decent and humane treatment” of prisoners of war, North Vietnam employed severe torture methods, including sleep deprivation, malnutrition, beatings, hanging by ropes, locking in irons, and prolonged solitary confinement.

The prison was built in Hanoi by the French between 1886 to 1901, when Vietnam was still part of French Indochina. The French called the prison Maison Centrale or Central House, which is still the designation for prisons housing dangerous or long sentence detainees in France. Known locally as Hỏa Lò prison, it was built at the previous location of the Phu Khanh village. The village baked locally sourced earthenware in furnaces, and the name “Hỏa Lò” means “fiery furnace” or “stove.”

The prison was originally designed to house 460 inmates, but was often overcrowded. Due to the harsh nature of French rule and a vicious justice system, the prison was always oversupplied with inmates. Many were political prisoners agitating for independence who became the subjects of torture and execution.

Re-purposed during the Vietnam War, the first U.S. prisoner sent to Hỏa Lò was Lieutenant Junior Grade Everett Alvarez Jr., who was shot down on August 5, 1964. From the beginning, U.S. POWs at Hỏa Lò endured miserable, unsanitary conditions, including meager rations of food and the ever-present threat starvation. Beginning early in 1967, a new area of the prison was opened for incoming American POWs. It was dubbed “Little Vegas,” and its individual buildings and areas were named after Las Vegas strip landmarks, such as “Golden Nugget,” “Thunderbird,” “Stardust,” “Riviera,” “Heartbreak Hotel” and the “Desert Inn.”





The Hanoi Hilton in a 1970 aerial surveillance photo.

Beginning in October 1969, the torture regime suddenly abated to a great extent, and life for the prisoners became less severe and generally more tolerable.<sup>[4][11][20]</sup> North Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh had died the previous month, possibly causing a change in policy towards POWs.<sup>[21]</sup> Many POWs speculated that Ho had been personally responsible for their mistreatment.

Also, a badly beaten and weakened POW who had been released that summer disclosed to the world press the conditions to which they were being subjected,<sup>[14]</sup> and the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia heightened awareness of the POWs' plight.<sup>[22]</sup>

Despite several escape attempts, no U.S. prisoner of war successfully escaped from a North Vietnamese prison. On November 21, 1970, U.S. Special Forces launched Operation Ivory Coast in an attempt to rescue 61 POWs believed to be held at the Sơn Tây prison camp 23 miles (37 km) west of Hanoi. Fifty-six commandos landed by helicopter and assaulted the prison, but the American prisoners had been moved some months earlier and none were rescued.

While the raid failed to free any POWs and was considered a significant intelligence failure, it had several positive implications for American prisoners. The most immediate effect was to affirm to the POWs that their government was actively attempting to repatriate them, which significantly boosted their morale.

Additionally, soon after the raid all acknowledged American prisoners in North Vietnam were moved to Hỏa Lò so that the North Vietnamese had fewer camps to protect and to prevent their rescue by U.S. forces.<sup>[23][24]</sup>

The post-raid consolidation brought many prisoners who had spent years in isolation into large cells holding roughly 70 men each. This created the "Camp Unity" communal living area at Hỏa Lò. The increased human contact further improved morale and facilitated greater military cohesion among the POWs.<sup>[14][24]</sup> At this time, the prisoners formally organized themselves under the 4th Allied POW Wing, whose name acknowledged earlier periods of overseas captivity among American military personnel in World War I, World War II, and the Korean War. This military structure was ultimately recognized by the North Vietnamese and endured until the prisoners' release in 1973.<sup>[25]</sup>



Nevertheless, by 1971, some 30–50 percent of the POWs had become disillusioned about the war, both because of the apparent lack of military progress and what they heard of the growing anti-war movement in the U.S., and some of them were less reluctant to make propaganda statements for the North Vietnamese.<sup>[26]</sup> Others were not among them; there were defiant church services<sup>[27]</sup> and an effort to write letters home that only portrayed the camp in a negative light.<sup>[28]</sup> Such prisoners were sometimes sent to a camp reserved for "bad attitude" cases.<sup>[29]</sup>

At the "Hanoi Hilton", POWs cheered the resumed bombing of North Vietnam starting in April 1972, whose targets included the Hanoi area.<sup>[29]</sup> The old-time POWs cheered even more during the intense "Christmas Bombing" campaign of December 1972,<sup>[29][30]</sup> when Hanoi was subjected for the first time to repeated B-52 Stratofortress raids. Although its explosions lit the night sky and shook the walls of the camp, scaring some of the newer POWs,<sup>[30]</sup> most saw it as a forceful measure to compel North Vietnam to finally come to terms.<sup>[29]</sup>



During the French colonial period, Vietnamese prisoners were detained and tortured at the Hỏa Lò prison. During the Vietnam War, the North Vietnamese did the same to American soldiers.

## Other North Vietnamese Prisons

Of the 13 prisons used to incarcerate POWs, five were located in Hanoi, and the remainder were situated outside the city.<sup>[31]</sup>



- **Alcatraz.** Located in north central Hanoi, Alcatraz was used to detain 11 particularly defiant American prisoners known as the 'Alcatraz Gang', including Jeremiah Denton, future U.S. Senator from Alabama, Sam Johnson, future U.S. Representative from Texas, and James Stockdale, later a Vice Admiral and recipient of the Medal of Honor.

Torture and long interrogation sessions were the norm at Alcatraz. The prisoners were forced to produce confessions or anti-war statements. They faced long periods of time in the "ropes" where the POWs hands and feet tied, then bound with their hands to their ankles—sometimes behind the back, sometimes in front.

The ropes were tightened then rotated upward—sometimes onto a hook—until the shoulders popped out of their sockets to the point that you couldn't breathe or simply passed out. Regular beatings with a hose, fan belt or bamboo pole was normal. An iron pole with a dirty rag was often forced into the POWs mouth to muffle their screams of pain.

After Richard Nixon's U.S. Presidential election win in November 1968, the Vietnamese wanted real propaganda out of the Alcatraz 11. They beat George McKnight for 36 hours straight. They beat and tortured Jeremiah "Jerry" Denton so brutally his arms turned black. Jim Mulligan was strung up and beaten for six days. Nels Tanner was beaten for 17 days. Sam Johnson was so brutalized that when he finally submitted, he literally could not write the apology demanded by the North Vietnamese.

In December 1969 most of the men were sent back to the Hanoi Hilton with the exception of Ron Storz. He had stated his fate was in God's hands and never relented to the torture demands. The isolation and severe torture in Alcatraz finally led to his death. Ron Storz was described as among the bravest and most aggressive American POW. Stockdale described him as "our spark plug, our hero". All 11 men would become some of the most well-respected POWs of the Vietnam War.

- **Briarpatch**. The Briarpatch camp, located 33 miles (53 km) northwest of Hanoi, intermittently held U.S. prisoners between 1965 and 1971. Conditions at the Briarpatch were notoriously grim, even by the standards of North Vietnamese prisons. Multiple POWs contracted beriberi at the camp due to severe malnutrition.
- **Camp Faith**. Located 9 miles (14 km) west of Hanoi, Camp Faith became operational in July 1970, when a major consolidation of U.S. prisoners began. At its peak, the population of Camp Faith was approximately 220 POWs. Three days after the Sơn Tây Raid, Camp Faith POWs were moved to Hỏa Lò prison in Hanoi.
- **Camp Hope**, also known as Sơn Tây, was operational between 1968 and 1970, holding 55 POWs. The camp was closed following the Sơn Tây Raid.
- **Dirty Bird**. Beginning in June 1967, several locations in the immediate vicinity of the Hanoi Thermal Power Plant were used to house POWs. Approximately 30 Americans were held at the Dirty Bird Camp, possibly in an attempt to prevent the bombing of the power plant. In October 1967, all prisoners held in Dirty Bird were removed to regular POW camps.
- **Dogpatch**. The Dogpatch camp, located 105 miles (169 km) northeast of Hanoi, opened in May 1972, when 220 POWs were transferred there from Hỏa Lò prison. The camp ceased operation in early 1973, when the POWs were transferred to Hanoi for repatriation to the United States.
- **Farnsworth**. Located 18 miles (29 km) southwest of Hanoi, Farnsworth became operational in August 1968, when 28 U.S. POWs captured outside North Vietnam were moved to this location. Over the next two years, several groups of POWs captured outside of North Vietnam were brought to the camp. Following the Sơn Tây Raid, Farnsworth's prisoner population was transferred to the Plantation Camp in Hanoi.



- **Hỏa Lò Prison**, also known as the Hanoi Hilton. Located in downtown Hanoi, Hỏa Lò prison was first used by the French colonists to hold political prisoners in what was then French Indochina. The prison became operational during the Vietnam War when it was used to house **Everett Alvarez, Jr.**, the first American pilot captured in North Vietnam. The prison was used without interruption until the repatriation of U.S. POWs in 1973.

Most of the prison was demolished in the mid-1990s and the site now contains two high-rise buildings, one of them the 25-story Somerset Grand Hanoi serviced apartment building. Other parts have been converted into a commercial complex retaining the original French colonial walls.

Only part of the prison exists today as a museum. The displays mainly show the prison during the French colonial period, including the guillotine room, still with original equipment, and the quarters for male and female Vietnamese political prisoners.

Building materials from several complete cells were saved, including original bricks, cement ceilings, concrete “beds” with ankle shackles, and an original cell door and transom window. After being in storage in Vietnam for six years and nearly another ten in Canada, the cells were reconstructed using the original materials and turned into a permanent exhibit that opened in 2023 at the American Heritage Museum in Stow, Massachusetts.

- **Mountain Camp**. The Mountain Camp, located 40 miles (64 km) northwest of Hanoi, became operational in December 1971, when one prisoner from Hỏa Lò and eight prisoners from Skidrow were moved to this location. This camp was used until January 1973 when its POW population was permanently moved to Hanoi for repatriation.
- **The Plantation**. Located in northeast Hanoi, the Plantation opened in June 1967. It was a Potemkin village-style camp run by the North Vietnamese as a propaganda showplace for foreign visitors to see and as a preparation camp for prisoners about to be released. Brute physical mistreatment of prisoners was rarer than in other camps, but did occur to some Plantation prisoners.<sup>[32]</sup> The camp operated until July 1970, when a major consolidation of U.S. POWs occurred.
- **Rockpile**. The Rockpile camp, located 32 miles (51 km) south of Hanoi, became operational in June 1971 when 14 Americans and foreign POWs captured outside North Vietnam were moved from Skidrow to the Rockpile. The camp was closed in February 1973, when its POWs were moved to Hanoi for repatriation.
- **Skidrow**. The Skidrow camp, located 6 miles (9.7 km) southwest of Hanoi, became operational as a U.S. POW detention facility in July 1968, when U.S. civilian and military prisoners captured outside North Vietnam were moved there.
- **The Zoo**. Located in the suburbs of Hanoi, the Zoo opened in September 1965 and remained operational until December 1970, when all U.S. prisoners were transferred to Hỏa Lò prison.

## Notable Vietnam-era POWs

- Donald Cook (Medal of Honor), USMC military advisor with the South Vietnamese Marine Corps. Awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously.
- Everett Alvarez, Jr., USN pilot, the first American airman shot down over North Vietnam and the second longest held prisoner of war in American history.
- Lawrence Barbay, USAF navigator/electronics warfare officer, prisoner for nearly 7 years, recipient of the Silver Star
- John L. Borling, USAF pilot, retired Major General.
- Charles G. Boyd, USAF pilot, recipient of the Air Force Cross, and the only Vietnam-era POW to reach the four-star rank.
- Phillip N. Butler, USN pilot the 8th longest-held POW in North Vietnam, served as president of Veterans for Peace after the war was over
- Robert Certain, USAF Navigator. Shot-down over Hanoi, captured 12/18/1972-released 3/29/1973
- Fred V. Cherry, veteran of the Korean War, recipient of the Air Force Cross, and the senior African American prisoner held in North Vietnam.
- George Coker, USN bombardier-navigator, recipient of the Navy Cross.
- Bud Day, USAF pilot, recipient of both the Medal of Honor and the Air Force Cross.
- Billy Davis, USA held by the Viet Cong from October 1971 until escaping in November 1971.
- Dieter Dengler, USN pilot, escaped a Pathet Lao prison camp in Laos, recipient of the Navy Cross.
- Jeremiah Denton, USN pilot, recipient of the Navy Cross, former U.S. Senator from Alabama.
- John P. Flynn, USAF pilot, retired Lieutenant General and recipient of the Air Force Cross.
- John Frederick, USMC radar intercept officer, veteran of four wars, recipient of the Navy Cross. Died in captivity in 1972.
- Larry Guarino, USAF pilot, veteran of three wars, recipient of the Air Force Cross.
- Sam Johnson, USAF pilot, veteran of the Korean and Vietnam Wars, member of the U.S. House of Representatives.
- James H. Kasler, USAF pilot, veteran of three wars, jet ace during the Korean War, and the only individual to be awarded the Air Force Cross three times.
- Richard P. Keirn, USAF pilot, prisoner of war in both World War II and the Vietnam War.
- William P. Lawrence, USN pilot, Vice Admiral; Commander U.S. Third Fleet, Superintendent of U.S. Naval Academy.
- Hayden Lockhart, first US Air Force pilot to become a POW.<sup>[33]</sup>
- John McCain, former USN pilot, former U.S. Senator from Arizona, and the 2008 Republican presidential nominee.
- Pete Peterson, USAF pilot, three-term member of the U.S. House of Representatives, and the first U.S. Ambassador to Vietnam.
- Jon Reynolds, USAF pilot, retired Brigadier General.
- Robinson Risner, USAF pilot, retired Brigadier General, two-time recipient of the Air Force Cross.
- Robert H. Shumaker, USN pilot, retired Rear Admiral.
- Lance Sijan, USAF pilot, and posthumous recipient of the Medal of Honor. Died in captivity in 1968.
- James Stockdale, USN pilot, retired Vice Admiral, and recipient of the Medal of Honor.
- Ronald E. Storz, USAF pilot, recipient of the Air Force Cross. Died in captivity in 1970.
- Orson Swindle, USMC pilot, former Commissioner of the Federal Trade Commission.

- Floyd Thompson, USA Special Forces, POW for nearly nine years, and the longest held prisoner of war in American history.
- Leo K. Thorsness, USAF pilot, recipient of the Medal of Honor.
- James N. Rowe, USA Special Forces, held by the Viet Cong from October 1963 until escaping in December 1968.
- Charles Klusmann, the first American airman shot down in the Vietnam War over Laos and the first to escape.
- William A. Robinson, (USAF Ret.), the longest-held enlisted POW of the Vietnam War, recipient of the Air Force Cross.
- Ralph T. Browning, USAF pilot, retired Brigadier General, Silver Star recipient

## Post-war accounts



American POWs in North Vietnam lining up for release on March 27, 1973



1973 Homecoming : Navy flier Phil Butler greets his family in Tulsa, Oklahoma after 7 years and 10 months as a POW in North Vietnam



After the implementation of the 1973 Paris Peace Accords, neither the United States nor its allies ever formally charged North Vietnam with the war crimes revealed to have been committed there. Extradition of North Vietnamese officials who had violated the Geneva Convention, which they had always insisted officially did not bind them because their nation had never signed it, was not a condition of the U.S. withdrawal from South Vietnam and ultimate abandonment of the South Vietnamese government.

In the 2000s, the Vietnamese government has held the position that claims that prisoners were tortured during the war are fabricated, but that Vietnam wants to move past the issue as part of establishing better relations with the U.S.<sup>[34]</sup> Bùi Tín, a North Vietnamese Army colonel-later turned dissident and exile, who believed that the cause behind the war had been just but that the country's political system had lost its way after reunification,<sup>[35]</sup> maintained in 2000 that no torture had occurred in the POW camps.<sup>[36]</sup> Tín stated that there were "a few physical hits like a slap across the face, or threats, in order to obtain the specific confessions," and that the worst that especially resistant prisoners such as Stockdale and Jeremiah Denton encountered was being confined to small cells.<sup>[36]</sup> Tran Trong Duyet, a jailer at Hoa Lo beginning in 1968 and its commandant for the last three years of the war, maintained in 2008 that no prisoners were tortured.<sup>[34]</sup> However, eyewitness accounts by American servicemen present a different account of their captivity.

After the war, Risner wrote the book *'Passing of the Night'* detailing his seven years at the Hanoi Hilton. Indeed, a considerable literature emerged from released POWs after repatriation, depicting Hoa Lo and the other prisons as places where such atrocities as murder; beatings; broken bones, teeth and eardrums; dislocated limbs; starvation; serving of food contaminated with human and animal feces; and medical neglect of infections and tropical disease occurred. These details are revealed in accounts by McCain (*Faith of My Fathers*), Denton, Alvarez, Day, Risner, Stockdale and dozens of others. The Hanoi Hilton was depicted in the 1987 Hollywood movie *The Hanoi Hilton*. In addition to memoirs, the U.S. POW experience in Vietnam was the subject of two in-depth accounts by authors and historians, John G. Hubbell's *P.O.W.: A Definitive History of the American Prisoner-of-War Experience in Vietnam, 1964–1973* (published 1976) and Stuart Rochester and Frederick Kiley's *Honor Bound: American Prisoners of War in Southeast Asia, 1961–1973* (published 1999).

## See also

- [Alcatraz Gang](#)
- [Hanoi March](#)
- [Operation Ivory Coast](#)
- [Hỏa Lò Prison](#)
- [Category: American prisoners of war](#)

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