Hanoi Hilton  
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Hoa Lo Prisoner, or as the U.S. Prisoners of War (POWs) referred to it as the “Hanoi Hilton” was where many of the captured U.S. soldiers were held during the Vietnam War. The prison, originally built by the French, was located in the center of Hanoi. Many of the POWs were held captive in Hoa Lo for almost eight years, where they had to deal with difficult living conditions and were constantly tortured for propaganda purposes. These POWs had several coping mechanisms that made their time in the Hanoi Hilton easier, which included a shift in the Code of Conduct, forming various methods of communication, turning to religion, and acts of defiance against the Vietnamese.

Although it is difficult to know exactly how many POWs there were in the Vietnamese’s prisons throughout the entirety of the war, at the end when the prisoners were released there were a total of 565 military and 26 civilian POWs. [[1]](#footnote-1) Most of the prisoners were kept in prisons around Hanoi, and each prison was given a different nickname by the soldiers that were held captive there, including, the “Hanoi Hilton, Briar Patch, Faith, Hope (Son Tay), Skidrow, D-1, Rockpile, Plantation, the Zoo, Alcatraz, and Dogpatch.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In August 1972, the final planning for Operation HOMECOMING took place in Honolulu that discussed the logistics of the soon to be returned POWs, in addition to making it into a public relations event coordinated by the White House to boost morale within the United States.[[3]](#footnote-3) Operation HOMECOMING was put into effect after January 27th, 1973 when the Paris Agreement or the “Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Viet-Nam,” which called for the release of all the U.S. POWs and the removal of final U.S. active forces from Vietnam.[[4]](#footnote-4) Operation HOMECOMING called for three stages, the first was the removal of the POWs from the prisons and they were to be relocated to the Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines. The POWS then went through processing, debriefing, and medical examinations before they were released and allowed to choose one of the thirty-one U.S. military hospitals to recover.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Operation HOMECOMING was an overall success, however, for some of the prisoners they had already been in the prisons for over seven years, where they dealt with many hardships, particularly those located at Hoa Lo Prison, or better known as, the “Hanoi Hilton” by the prisoners. The first American prisoner that resided in Hoa Lo was Everett Alvarez Junior who was captured on August, 5th 1964 and remained there for nine years.[[6]](#footnote-6) Hoa Lo Prison was originally built by the French in 1886 to hold high-ranking Vietnamese government officials, but once the war against the Americans began, it transformed into a POW prison.[[7]](#footnote-7) The walls of the prison were four feet thick and twenty feet high that had five additional feet of electrified barbed wire extended from the ends.[[8]](#footnote-8) Captain Truong Son, the camp commander, stated, “When we decided to use the prison for the Americans we worked hard to improve it. We broke down many walls to make much bigger cells.”[[9]](#footnote-9) The large cell blocks received different names from those that were incarcerated, which included, “New Guy Village,” “Heartbreak Hotel,” “Little Vegas,” and “Camp Unity.”[[10]](#footnote-10) By 1973, the cells were quite crowded, one prisoner recalled anywhere from forty to sixty men in some cells that were only twenty-two by forty-five long.[[11]](#footnote-11) On November 20th, 1970, the United States Army attempted to rescue POWs from Son Tay, a prison that was about twenty-three miles away. However, the raid was unsuccessful, but it caused the Vietnamese to move many POWs from the outlying camps into the Hanoi Hilton, because it was easier to defend.[[12]](#footnote-12) Even more POWs were moved to the Hanoi Hilton when the bombing raids in Hanoi continued persistently through 1973.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The prisoners in the Hanoi Hilton, especially those that were incarcerated before 1970, lived in horrific conditions, and were often succumbed to torture. “American prisoners had slept on elevated concrete blocks, covered with wooden boards and rattan mats, locked behind steel barred doors.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Lieutenant Lee Ellis recalled that only source of protein they received was a two inch cube of bean once week.[[15]](#footnote-15) On a typical day the Vietnamese administered pumpkin or cabbage soup and seaweed to the prisoners twice a day.[[16]](#footnote-16) The Vietnamese tortured the prisoners in attempt to get them to state the United States were the aggressors of the war, to denounce the U.S. government, and confess that they bombed schoolchildren and villagers.[[17]](#footnote-17) There were various forms of torture; some prisoners were put into solitary confinement for years at a time; others were put through more physical torture that included leg irons, pinch cuffs, and blindfolds.[[18]](#footnote-18) Lt. Ellis wrote about a specific position that the Vietnamese would put the prisoners in that he referred to as the “pretzel.”

After the prisoner’s legs were ties together, his arms were laces tightly behind his back until the elbows touched and the shoulders were virtually pilled out of joint. Then the torturer would push the bound arms up and over the head, while applying pressure with a knee to the victim. During torture, the circulation is cut off and the limbs go to sleep, but the joint pain continues to increase as the ligaments and muscles tear. When the ropes are finally removed, circulation surges back into the ‘dead’ limbs, causing excruciating pain.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Another famous POW, Admiral James Stockdale, was put through at least fifteen episodes of physical torture in which his leg was broken, his shoulder dislocated, and his head smashed.[[20]](#footnote-20) In 1970, the treatment of the POWs within prisons improved, which some attributed to letter writing campaigns from Americans demanding better treatment, others believed it was due to the death of Ho Chi Minh, and some thought it was because many of the propaganda campaigns completed by the North Vietnamese backfired.[[21]](#footnote-21) Although the POWs began to receive better treatment, it did not erase everything they had been through before that point, and they still resided in. To deal with the emotional and physical trauma they were constantly put through, the soldiers came up with many strategies and coping mechanisms that made their time in the Hanoi Hilton more bearable.

One of the first strategies developed was by Admiral Stockdale who was captured by the Vietnamese and placed in the Hanoi Hilton in August 1965. Immediately upon arrival he was submitted to torture, and knew his fellow men were tortured as well, so he made an adjustment to the Code of Conduct.[[22]](#footnote-22) The original Code of Conduct was laid out in the Geneva Convention that stated the soldiers were only supposed to reveal their name, rank, service number, and date of birth.[[23]](#footnote-23) Stockdale told his fellow POWs to resist the captors to their best of their ability, but not to allow them to cause the POWs any permanent damage. Once they reached the point in which they could no longer take any torture, Stockdale told the POWs to give the Vietnamese distorted, or false and misleading information.[[24]](#footnote-24) Stockdale set up this new “self-sustaining organization” because the information that these POWs did not have any true value when it came to the United States’ intelligence, and was not worth the life of the soldiers.[[25]](#footnote-25) Stockdale wanted these men to still have a sense of dignity, so he told the men to make sure the Vietnamese had to start over the whole interrogation process each time, and to tell his fellow inmates everything they had been forced to tell their captors.[[26]](#footnote-26) Once the soldiers returned, most of the POWs were granted amnesty, as long as they agreed to adhere to the Code of Conduct from that point on.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Another important component of the sanity and morale of the POWs in the Hanoi Hilton was communication with one another. Many of the soldiers were kept in solitary confinement or were located with one another, but were not allowed to talk, so they came up with creative ways to communicate. Lt. Ellis stated that he could talk through a sixteen inch wall with a blanket muffler as long as guards were not close by.[[28]](#footnote-28) The soldiers also developed a variety of hand signals so they could communicate without the risk of the Vietnamese hearing them. However, the most effective form of communication that the POWs used in the Hanoi Hilton was the tap code, which was passed down by Captain Carlyle Smith Harris, when he was captured in 1965.[[29]](#footnote-29) Captain Harris remembered learning the tap system from an instructor at survival school training, and taught his fellow POWs the five by five square technique.[[30]](#footnote-30) The soldiers would convey their messages through the tap codes with their knuckles, bamboo brooms, tin cans, coughs, and of course just simple taps.[[31]](#footnote-31) John Borling, a POW at the Hanoi Hilton wrote, “the tap code became our lifeline, our means of passing along information and words of encouragement to one another.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Every night, their sign off to one another was 2,2 1,2 4,5, which equaled GBU, and stood for God Bless You.[[33]](#footnote-33) Borling was most known for his poetry that he wrote memorized, and spread throughout the prison using the tap system. In one of his sonnets he wrote, “Here, months and years run quickly down dim halls, But days, the daze, the empty days come hard. I used to count a lot, count everything. Like exercise and laps, and world of prayer.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Communication was vital in the survival of these men while at the camps, it allowed them to pass along important information, as well as know that they were not alone.

Other POWs in the Hanoi Hilton looked beyond just the companionship of one another, and turned to God and religion during their time in the camp for additional hope. Prayer became a way for the men to take their minds off their physical pain and suffering.[[35]](#footnote-35) The Vietnamese denied the POWs request for Bibles, so the men would concentrate and try to remember verses and stories from the Bible and share it with one another.[[36]](#footnote-36) Men in solitary confinement would continuously repeat psalms, pray out loud, and sing hymns. The POWs, “turned to religion to avoid going insane.”[[37]](#footnote-37) After POWs began to congregate and have worshipping services the Vietnamese strictly forbade it, but that did not stop the POWs. Robbie Risner, a POW in the Hanoi Hilton, was held at gunpoint in front of the fellow soldiers after he was tortured for participating in community worship.[[38]](#footnote-38) Sam Johnson, also a POW at the camp, wrote, “So emboldened by the simple act of community worship, we broke out into patriotic songs like “God Bless America” and works of that magnitude.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Once the Vietnamese began to lighten their restrictions in 1970, the POWs began to protest to gain the right to have a service on Sundays. After nearly sixty hours of straight nonviolent protests that consisted of singing hymns and patriotic songs, they were granted the right to have a fifteen minute service every Sunday.[[40]](#footnote-40) Religion gave the POWs something bigger than themselves to believe in and allowed them to continuously have hope, even in their loneliness and darkest times.

Another way that many POWs made it through their time at the Hanoi Hilton was through acts of defiance, some were subtle, others were more extreme, but both gave the POWs a sense of pride and determination. Stockdale wrote, “We had learned to be very effective at making trouble for our adversaries, and at taking care of our own. And we loved it. It made life make sense to us.”[[41]](#footnote-41) Stockdale constantly resisted the captures and was deemed the leader of the “Alcatraz Gang” for his constant acts against the Vietnamese.[[42]](#footnote-42) Stockdale was supposed to be paraded around in Hanoi as a propaganda campaign, but slashed himself with a homemade scalpel and beat himself with a stool, because he knew the Vietnamese would not parade someone that looked physical beaten.[[43]](#footnote-43) In addition, he was ordered to confess American imperialistic crimes, and was left with pen and paper by the Vietnamese to do so, and instead he wrote, “Isn’t credibility of defiance what it’s all about in the long run around here? Where is your ego? Who are you to be shoved around?”[[44]](#footnote-44) Others would commit other acts of defiance whether it was sings hymns as loudly as they could, or showing both middle fingers at the camera when the Vietnamese were photographing the prisoners for propaganda, as Lieutenant Paul Galanti did. Each little act of defiance gave these men a purpose and hope for the future.

In conclusion, many POWs had others ways of coping with the struggles that they faced while they were imprisoned in the Hanoi Hilton, but some of the more common ways were through the development of various mode of communication with one another, religion, and defiance against the enemy. In addition, Stockdale’s decision to change to the Code of Conduct allowed the soldiers to still have honor, while not being succumbed to more torture than they could handle. Although the POWs still had many difficulties to face, these various methods made their time in Hoa Lo a little bit more manageable.

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