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Many studies of combat experiences and their effects on the participants can be made by direct and relatively close observation either at the time or shortly thereafter. However, reasonably close contact with prisoners of war can only be had after their release. In the case of the Americans held by the North Vietnamese this contact in many cases came only after they had been held for several years in unspeakable conditions and had endured extraordinary hardships. Thus, even the best studies of these events can only be based on vicarious observation. We present here one such study, followed by a commentary by a former prisoner of war.

THE FACELESS POW

by

William K. Carr

Being captured and imprisoned by a foreign military force is a shocking and demoralizing experience. For most persons who become prisoners of war (POW's), the experience is their introduction to a complete loss of freedom. It may also be the prisoner's first intimate contact with a foreign population whose language and behavior are unintelligible to him. The degree of difference between the cultures of the captor and captive is a predictable measure of the difficulties confronting a prisoner from the moment of captivity to the moment of release or escape. Some residual effects of captivity may also be due to the culturally determined behavior of captor towards his prisoners.

Internment as a POW by an alien captor requires that the prisoner adjust to a lifestyle for which he normally has no preparation and no desire. Creature comforts of his precaptivity life are now

disallowed and new ones substituted. A POW's clothing, food, living quarters, daily routine and privacy are not only no longer matters for his choice, they are almost inevitably to his disliking.

Less apparent, but just as real, is the necessity for accommodating to the captor's demands and expectations of POW behavior. Although it is customary for camp rules to be made explicit to prisoners, these rules cover only the more obvious aspects of prison life. Formal policies for controlling POW behavior, announced with great clarity by the captor, deal primarily with camp security and so anticipate situations that the captor is aware could develop. What are not made explicit are the culturally determined rules for behavior to which the captor unconsciously conforms and to which he expects his foreign prisoners also to conform.

Adapting to the diet, sanitation facilities and security regulations

imposed by the captor may be distasteful but at least these conditions of captivity are generally unambiguous, and they may even be negotiable with the captor. Adapting to the captor's unspoken cultural rules for "correct" behavior is, however, largely a process of trial and error. Rarely does a POW receive any tutoring from his captor. For those areas of human conduct performed unconsciously, it is much easier to recognize "incorrect" behavior after the fact than it is to admonish in advance. Captors, therefore, punish prisoners for their mistakes without first telling them all the rules, and, because of the proven threat of unpredictable penalties for inadvertently offending the captor, prisoners are reluctant to explore possibilities for widening their range of behavior beyond what they know to be safe.

A POW held by people whose cultural habits are unknown to him is as surely confined by this ignorance as he is by barbed wire and armed guards. The more exotic the captor's culture the more difficult it is for the prisoner to learn its rules as a means of survival.

The collective experience of U.S. military personnel subjected to POW internment in Vietnam during the 1960's illustrates the tragic consequences that can come from unintentional and unconscious mutual misunderstandings between captor and captive. Equally important, for future survival training and for clearer interpretations of the Code of Conduct, the POW experience in Vietnam also demonstrates how dramatically prisoners' chances of survival are improved when the captor's Code of Conduct is understood.

Although most U.S. military personnel captured by hostile forces in Vietnam received some unnecessarily rough treatment while being transported from their place of capture to a permanent holding site, the brutalizing of prisoners that caused international

condemnation typically occurred during formal interrogation sessions in established POW camps or prisons. It was at this point that the essential worth of the interrogator and the POW were tested—or so the captives thought.

Once the POW had identified himself with "name, rank, serial number and date of birth," he refused to answer further questions, in the best tradition of the American fighting man. Because of a common interpretation of the Code of Conduct, U.S. military personnel generally feel that any response to direct interrogation by an enemy captor, beyond self-identification, is likely to be judged traitorous or at least cowardly. Also, because the American popular conception of POW interrogations is based on Gestapo-style portrayals, we assume the universal purpose of such interrogations is the extraction of military intelligence. If a prisoner answers the interrogator's first, seemingly innocuous questions, he will only encourage further and more incriminating questions that cannot remain unanswered with impunity.

For these reasons, and as a matter of principle and personal integrity, American POW's do not willingly give their captors information. It was this refusal to respond to Vietnamese interrogators that caused much of the physical suffering among the prisoners. Attempts to justify their silence as compliance with the American military Code of Conduct or with the terms of the Geneva Convention only infuriated the captor and provoked scorn and punishment.

The Vietnamese did not respect the prisoners' silence as evidence of their being good soldiers, loyal to their country. On the contrary, the Americans' natural self-confidence was interpreted as arrogance and their refusal to answer interrogators' questions was seen as blatant insincerity. It seems not to have occurred to the captor that their POW's were responding to captivity as

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normal Americans rather than as defective Vietnamese.

The prisoners soon learned to minimize their "arrogance" because that odious quality in their behavior was frequently pointed out to them and persuasively discouraged by immediate and harsh retribution. One repatriated former POW reported being struck in the head by a guard, for example, while seated across a table from his interrogator. The prisoner had crossed his legs without permission, much to the interrogator's annoyance. This self-indulgent act was called disrespectful and arrogant.

Ironically, the prisoner's leg crossing may well have indicated he was moving in the direction wanted by the interrogator. It suggests the prisoner was beginning to accept the interrogation as something other than an entirely non-negotiable situation. In any case, the American was learning what Vietnamese consider arrogant behavior. An understanding of what constituted insincerity was, however, much longer in coming.

Vietnamese definitions of insincerity and sincerity do not of course coincide with American, and they were not explained to the POW's in such graphic and unambiguous terms as arrogance. In fact, the captor's definition of sincerity seemed to the prisoners to have nothing to do with the concept. The explanations sounded like only euphemisms for "You prisoners must answer all the interrogator's questions." Eventually the POW's did understand what their captors meant by "sincerity," but only after a great deal of mistreatment bordering on torture.

"Sincerity," to Americans, means conducting oneself according to one's true feelings. Sincerity is consistency between what one thinks and what one does. A sincere person is strong enough to resist bending unwillingly to mere circumstances. Sincerity is courage, while insincerity is a form of lying. Deceitful behavior may at times be

expedient, but it usually contradicts one's self-respect.

The East Asian concept of sincerity, shared by the Vietnamese, teaches the individual to separate his feelings from his behavior.¹ The ideal, well-integrated Vietnamese personality is one that is flexible and adept at accommodating to situations for which there are distinct rules to guide behavior. Since it is assumed everyone knows how to behave correctly, a sincere person is expected to suppress any feelings that conflict with the reality of existing conditions and to conduct himself in accordance with the dictates of the moment. Anyone of normal intelligence who flaunts the rules for correct behavior is considered selfish and insincere.

Vietnamese selfishness and insincerity are regarded as attempts to take unfair advantage of those who are complying with the practices of proper social conduct. The insincere person is guilty of refusing to sacrifice his own psychological comfort for the benefit of others. Insincerity is not taken lightly among Vietnamese because the price of sincerity is high.

To avoid being accused of insincerity, the Vietnamese follow an elaborate protocol of interpersonal ritual designed to demonstrate clearly one's compliance with the demand that personal feelings be of secondary importance. Good form takes precedence over individual preference. Regardless of one's attitude about another person, for example, there are occasions in which one must do what is expected in the relationship. The penalty for ignoring the rules can be severe, even between people of long and close acquaintance.

It is not surprising, then, that the American POW's had some difficulty in comprehending their jailers' definition of sincerity. The command for sincerity must have seemed frivolous except for the insistent and threatening manner in which it was made. In refusing interrogators' questions the Americans were

already being perfectly sincere. Their feelings were exactly congruent with their behavior. Until they learned otherwise, the POW's saw interrogations as a tug of war between the captor who wanted hard intelligence and themselves who had no intention of giving such information.

Gradually, over many months and several years, the prisoners developed a communal wisdom about how to handle interrogations in a way calculated to deny the enemy meaningful information while reducing his use of apparently senseless and arbitrary brutality. The key to this wisdom was the cessation of categorical refusals to respond to questions. Until the key was found, the typical POW response to interrogators' probings was an announcement about restrictions on information beyond "name, rank, serial number and date of birth" as imposed by the Code of Conduct. Somehow, this rigid response, which in effect refuted the interrogators' belief in their right to interrogate, changed into an equivocal response. The POW's learned to stop saying "no" and to say "maybe" instead.

Former prisoners of the Vietnamese have described how interrogations became "conversations" by various kinds of displays of "sincerity" in which feigned difficulties in understanding the questions, asserted ignorance on one subject but professed knowledge on another, and the rephrasing of questions before responding, were substituted for the earlier practice of maintaining a stoic silence. The new technique was generally successful in lowering the degree of physical violence inflicted during interrogations. It also reduced both the number of questions asked and the length of the sessions. To the POWs' delight, interrogators usually accepted what they were told and, contrary to previous expectations, interrogators did not persist in requiring the revelation of

The history of American POW internment in North Vietnam shows changes in official policy in the treatment of prisoners between the mid-1960's and the early 1970's that are not connected to changes in the prisoners' behavior, however. Exploitation of POW's for propaganda, and mistreatment of prisoners as retaliation for U.S. bombings of Hanoi, for example, ignored any improvement in relations between camp personnel and prisoners. The attitude of interrogators towards those they interrogated, on the other hand, was as much personal as official. If a prisoner responded acceptably to interrogation, subsequent abuse was unnecessary. Instructions from higher authority for harassing prisoners as a group was, however, a different matter. The POW's did not solve all their problems by merely simulating sincerity.

The method for dealing with interrogations developed by captive U.S. military personnel, through which they were able to satisfy their captors while adhering to their own principles of integrity, was a masterpiece of ingenuity, but it did not result in the prisons being converted into rest camps. Food, hygiene and medical care remained substandard. Punishment for the infraction of prison rules continued in force. Propaganda statements coerced from prisoners were periodically broadcast. The method did, however, make manageable the one predictable, inescapable phase of captivity that could last as long as the captor chose it to and that probably resulted in more bodily harm to prisoners than any other single aspect of internment.

The technique of responding to interrogations by appearing to give substantive answers but actually saying nothing of consequence was not a glib joke on the Vietnamese captors, nor did it resemble the comic doubletalk of "Hogan's Heroes." It was a technique, discovered by chance, that was effective because of certain cultural charac-

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teristics peculiar to East Asian interpersonal behavior codes. If the POW's technique had not coincided with those codes, their responses to interrogators' questions might well have been seen for what they were, viz, attempts to evade answering; or worse, as attempts to mock the interrogators.

To the American prisoners, their behavior in circumventing interrogations was a consciously insincere bit of role-playing. It was contrived and therefore deceitful, and, for the POW's, a survival technique to be discarded when no longer needed. To the Vietnamese captors, however, the prisoners' behavior was sincere, not because the captors were fooled, but because the prisoners' behavior took on a form that means sincerity to Vietnamese. The captor was not interested in American-style sincerity which requires the individual to act the way he feels. Vietnamese sincerity entails behaving according to the dictates of circumstances.

It is unlikely the American prisoners fully understood why their "deceitfulness" softened their captors' treatment of them. It was sufficient that it did. The POW's accommodation to the captor's expectations is explicable, nonetheless, and the following analysis of those expectations argues for the inclusion of cultural information in captivity survival training courses for U.S. military personnel.

When the American prisoners were refusing to give more than "name, rank, serial number and date of birth" to their Vietnamese interrogators during the early years of the war, they were insulting their captors in an unforgivable way. This was not a problem of frustrating the interrogator's effort to extract usable military intelligence, but a question of denying the very existence of the interrogator's person. That is, American POW's were denying the interrogators "face."

"Face" is the essence of one's being. To have no "face" is to be a nonperson.

Although "face" is not a quality of one's personality, it is a personal asset, the possession of which is necessary for one's social identity.² An individual has "face" only in interpersonal relationships that are created, structured and sustained according to precise regulations carried out by well-defined rituals. A man among strangers, for example, has no "face" and since he is therefore not a person, he is due none of the amenities accorded to and expected from humans who are persons.

"Face" is created when two individuals enter into a relationship for the utilitarian purpose of providing each other goods and services. Such relationships place each participant in a ranked position relative to the other and these positions are called "face." A person has "face" when he holds that position, but he does not carry "face" away from the relationship. "Face" is specific to individuals.

The person holding the higher "face" uses the power assigned that position to define the nature and terms of the relationship. Although these relationships are intended for mutual benefit, it is a privilege of the superior person to designate at the beginning what each participant may expect from the other.

Except for kinship ties and friendships, "face" relationships are the only kind in which an individual may reasonably predict he will find honesty and reliability. Strangers cannot be trusted because they have no "face." "Face," however, guarantees dependability.

Stories of captured U.S. military personnel being physically and verbally abused by the civilian population of Vietnam while being transported through villages are familiar to the American public. This abuse was not entirely due to the prisoners being enemies, however. The Vietnamese can be hostile to any stranger, including other Vietnamese. A nonperson is a nonperson, regardless of his origin. What the American POW's did not at first

realize was that once they had arrived at a permanent internment site and were seated opposite an interrogator, the rules for their treatment and the expectations of their behavior radically changed.

Confronted now by a known or knowable individual, the prisoner was about to be transformed from a non-person to a person. No longer a stranger among strangers, no one was going to throw stones at the prisoner and he, too, was expected to adapt his behavior to the change in circumstances. The captors assumed their prisoner would be more than pleased at the opportunity to acquire "face" by entering into a relationship of mutual benefit with the interrogator who already had considerable "face" with other prison officials.³

But of course it did not turn out that way, at least not at first. Americans do not have "face" and the POW's certainly were not interested in it, even if the interrogator had explained it to them. "Face" to the Vietnamese is an unquestioned condition of life that is not intellectualized for purposes of explanation. So the foreign prisoners remained uninformed of what was expected of them.

The interrogators nevertheless persisted in their attempts to make persons out of their "faceless" prisoners who, for unfathomable and mysterious Occidental reasons, insisted on being nobodies. Naturally, the captor was not motivated out of concern for the well-being of the POW's. The interrogators had a job to do that depended on the prisoners accepting a particular role in what was obviously a task of common advantage; a fact which unfortunately escaped the prisoners' notice.

There was no doubt in any interrogator's mind that he outranked the prisoner in their relationship, and, as the superior, it was the interrogator's right to define the nature of that relationship, as it was the subordinate prisoner's obligation to accept the definition

Under normal conditions, either party to a potential "face" agreement can refuse it and the whole thing is forgotten. American POW's were not given that choice.

The prisoners' failure to display any recognition of the fact that they had no choice confused and angered the captor. The prisoners' refusals also to evince interest in a relationship with interrogators meant, to the captor, that the prisoners put no value on the interrogators' "face." The prisoners were treating their captors as strangers, as non-existent persons.

We know from debriefing reports of repatriated POW's that the prisoner-interrogator standoff lasted a long while. The interrogators could not back down and the POW's could not retreat because for a time they did not know how without dishonor.

There was, however, a way to break the deadlock which the POW's finally saw. It is a way provided in the Vietnamese system of personal behavior that permits the individual to respond "correctly" to demands made on him without emotional or intellectual commitment to the acts. Behavior is judged more by its form than by its content. In the case of the POW's it was enough that they should respond to the interrogators' questions. It was not necessary they "answer" the questions.⁴

Devious, evasive and equivocal replies to interrogators' questions were not "answers" in the American sense of the word. The replies were only "responses"; but that was what the captor wanted.

By responding to questions, the prisoners acknowledged the interrogators' right to ask questions. That is, the prisoners conceded the interrogators' privilege to define the nature of the relationship, thereby giving "face" to all concerned. The form of the relationship was now correct and details of its content were secondary, as they always are in matters of "face."

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Vietnamese ethics forbid the exploitation of "face" contracts, for that is what these relationships are in effect. They are contracts conceived in perpetuity as vehicles for mutual support in a variety of areas of the contractors' lives.⁵ "Face" is not friendship, however, and it need not be accompanied by feelings of camaraderie. Also, the contract does not pertain to the general welfare of the principals; only designated obligations are accountable.

An excellent example of the bilateral, reciprocal quality, as well as the technical limitations, of "face" was described by one returned POW who had been held in Hanoi for several years. Having long since learned to refrain from outright refutation of his prison interrogator, this POW had reached a phase of his captivity in which he was not singled out for arbitrary abuse. If the prison commandant chose to punish all the inmates, then of course everyone suffered, but at least the protagonist of this story was on nonviolent terms with the interrogator.

It was in these circumstances that the subject prisoner was one day taken from his cell to the interrogator's office for questioning about a communications code discovered in the prisoners' toilet area by the guards. The code was obviously of the prisoners making and secret communications among prisoners was punishable by any means the captors saw fit.

The prisoner denied any knowledge of the code with the quite plausible and true argument that he had been separated from the other prisoners. Although he persisted in his claim of ignorance and was finally returned to his cell unharmed, it was clear the interrogator thought he was lying.

A day or two after this scene, the interrogator left for a brief holiday and his leaving was made known to all. Shortly thereafter, two interrogators whom the prisoner had never seen arrived to question him further. After a somewhat perfunctory but brutalizing

attempt to force a confession from the prisoner, the interrogators left the prison. Suddenly, the original interrogator returned from his "holiday" and was "outraged" at hearing of this intrusion by outsiders.

This rather transparent charade makes sense if one keeps in mind that the prisoner did not refuse the regular interrogator's questions. In fact, he responded volubly, saying more than the interrogator wanted to hear, but not on the subject in question. The prisoner's response was acceptable to the interrogator because there was the matter of "face" to consider. If the interrogator had used or threatened violence himself, he would have lost "face"—a more serious loss than the information he was seeking, which, in any case, might be attainable elsewhere.

In not accusing the prisoner of lying, and by pretending to know nothing of the two outside interrogators, the principal interrogator did nothing to destroy his relationship with the prisoner. The prisoner, in turn, by also pretending not to know who had really sent the two visitors, permitted his interrogator to save "face." For each party, preserving the form of the relationship was more valuable than unmasking its content.

Of the many lessons to be learned from the experience of U.S. POW's during the Vietnam War, surely a fundamental one is that a captor's culture is just as much a part of the physical reality of captivity as the filthy latrines and the monotonous diet.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



A graduate of George Washington and Columbia Universities, William K. Carr is a research anthropologist. He holds the rank of Commander, U.S. Naval Reserve.

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Comment

by

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As William K. Carr has correctly pointed out, most American POW's captured in North Vietnam anticipated incarceration to include multiple physical deprivations. Although dog meat and rotten fish were distasteful at first, even the most finicky adjusted, resigned themselves to the fact that they were being discriminated against, and soon looked forward to the two meals as the highlight of the day. What the POW's did not anticipate were the inherent cultural differences between American and Vietnamese society and the captors' demand that captives adapt to and abide by the captors' unspoken cultural rules for "correct behavior." As examples of cultural differences the author examines American and Vietnamese concepts of "sincerity" and "face." He suggests that had the POW been aware of Vietnamese perceptions of these concepts, he might have employed this knowledge to improve his relationship with his captors and thus have reduced the severity of his protracted incarceration.

The major issue after reading Carr, and an issue which he doesn't seem to consider, is that even if a POW had been aware of the cultural differences in behavior patterns and values between

Americans and Vietnamese, how might he have employed this information? Did he indeed *want* to improve his relationship with his captors? Carr is correct that as a matter of principle and personal integrity American POW's did not willingly give their captors information. Indeed, refusal to respond to Vietnamese interrogators and their efforts to exploit POW's for propaganda purposes did cause much of the physical suffering among the prisoners. That the Vietnamese did not respect the prisoners' silence as evidence of their being good Americans and dedicated to the ideological principles for which they were fighting was really of no concern to the Americans.

The East Asian concept of sincerity is in the category of "nice to know" information, and might conceivably have been used at certain times to minimize maltreatment. Subsequent abuse may have been unnecessary. Most POW's, however, preferred to have the Vietnamese think of them as being "diehards," as being unwilling to "role play," to feign sincerity, or to compromise their standards—regardless of the consequences.

Although insulting captors was not

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conductive to good health, it at least provided one great source of self-satisfaction in an environment in which gratifications were few and far between. Hence the old POW adage, "if it hurts, you know you are doing the right thing." And while it may have been painful at the time, most POW's still continue to identify the times of crises as their greatest moments. Days spent in irons or cuffs, or in holes in the ground, or in solitary—all of these represented a degree of status among POW's. A psychologist or cultural anthropologist might not be able to figure this out from books he has read, but the most respected POW's were the defiant ones, who stated their cases politely, looked their captors square in the eye, and stood proud. Such action demanded courage. They often suffered severe consequences for their behavior. But this was the approach that the real leaders such as Risner and Stockdale employed.

The POW with moral courage and genuine substance to his character would have found it difficult to "role play" for any extended period of time. He preferred to tell it as it is and let the

captor know precisely where he stood.

Theoretically, Carr's thesis makes sense. In practice, not. The magnitude of differences in culture is perhaps relevant to predicting the degree of difficulty which a POW might expect. Indeed, one of the many lessons of the Vietnamese experience is that a captor's culture is as much a part of the physical reality of captivity as the filthy latrines and monotonous diet. Perhaps we should include cultural information as part of captivity survival training courses for U.S. military personnel. But, in doing so, we should instill more deeply our own moral, ethical, and ideological codes. Rather than teach the potential captive to play the part of the enemy, we should have him adhere more closely to the conduct of a good American. Rather than conform to the enemy's culture pattern, have him conform to ours. Ultimately, one's performance as a POW will be measured by fellow Americans, not by the enemy.

[Colonel Reynolds was a prisoner of war from 28 November 1965 to 12 February 1973.]

