

Chapter One

Ground Pounders

Call them what you will: grunts, ground-pounders, foot soldiers. Some even prefer “rednecks,” “uneducated,” “common enlisted men.” Whatever label you choose, there’s one thing each of these men deserve, and that is the respect and undying gratitude of the American people for the sacrifices they made in Vietnam. These men didn’t wear shiny bars and ribbons across their chests, nor did they have oak leaf clusters on their collars. They were not recognized as “those who gave their all” in the prison camps and came back as public heroes. What they *did* have, and still possess to this day, is an unbelievable depth of pride in their country, a love of their fellow Americans, and a spirit that could not be broken despite the horrendous and inhumane treatment forced upon them while Prisoners of War in Vietnam.

Enlisted men were considered uneducated and lacking in the ability to manipulate their captors as effectively as POW officers. On his own level, with or without extensive training, holding an eighth grade education or being an Ivy League scholar, a celebrated aviator or a private with a rifle, each man endured his own living hell at the hands of his captors. It matters not who was beaten more severely or deprived most often of nourishing food. It doesn’t matter who was the SRO (Senior Ranking Officer) in camp, or whose cage

in the jungle was smaller. Each man paid an extreme price for his service and loyalty to the United States of America, and each has his own set of deeply embedded scars that remain forever haunting from within. The memories alone have provided a hell on earth that most humans cannot begin to fathom or understand, let alone live and breathe each day as the gnawing ghosts claw at their remaining sanity.

We have all read the numerous accounts of hellish days in captivity for downed, high-ranking aviators, but seldom has the story been told of the common enlisted man and his fight for survival in the jungles of Vietnam. He didn't have a mind full of strategic plans of attack or maps that were memorized for pinpoint bombing raids. And maybe he didn't have the opportunity to attend POW survival training before being shipped to an unfamiliar and even more unfriendly country. His only equipment for survival was a fierce loyalty to America, a head that was filled with the ways of the military and what it expected of him, and a soul that would remain free despite the tortures inflicted by his enemy. The enlisted man was not highly decorated or known for giving speeches to great crowds, but he was far from common and needs to be remembered as such.

It seems the majority of military men I've met or read about were officers of some rank or other all with their own stories to tell. From Ensigns and Admirals, Lieutenants and Generals, even numerous Special Forces personnel, all have related to me their accounts of how they saw and experienced Vietnam from various levels of the fighting arena. I have the utmost respect and admiration for each and every man who pulled time in that ghastly jungle. But I, like so many people, tend to overlook the real backbone of any military operation—the enlisted man.

After the recent completion of my first book about a Navy SEAL, I had the great honor to be introduced to another man who was far removed from the glitz and glory of "Operation Homecoming" in February and March of 1973, staged by then President Nixon for the POWs held in Vietnam. In general, 591 captured Americans left Vietnam headed for their homes in the United States, of which 566 were military personnel. Of this entire group, only 59 were enlisted men, 11 were Marines, and 48 were Army personnel, respectively.

From a total of 26 Marines captured, 16 spent their time in jungle camps, while the total of 77 Army POWs were all kept in the jungles instead of the prison camps to the north in Hanoi, save a select few. Most of the jungle captives were eventually moved north after the death of Ho Chi Minh and for reasons of security when the U.S. began bombing in late 1969. Throughout captivity, though, the entire group of POWs was “top-heavy” with officers and aviators from the Navy and Air Force. Nevertheless, each man had his own story to tell or to keep to himself, as some have chosen. Yet, after having spent time with the man I will describe shortly, I found the days for an enlisted man were no better, and many times worse, than were those of the officers. Those stories will come a little later, though, because this man needs a proper and thorough introduction of his background and raising, as it contributes greatly to his overall story. I feel, too, that at least a little history of the system, in which he was forced to endure countless days at the hands of his captors, is necessary to understand his story.

From the text of the Nuremberg trials, military men were convicted for committing “war crimes” and “crimes against humanity.” In 1949, North Vietnam had signed the Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War. Along with three other countries, China, North Korea, and the Soviet Union, North Vietnam filed a reservation to Article 85. Their argument being that if a Nazi could not be protected by saying, “I was only following orders,” then war criminals in the future could not hide behind the Geneva Convention, either. The Vietnamese viewed their American captives as criminals rather than Prisoners of War, so when a POW demanded his rights as stated in the Geneva Convention, he was met with a clear and concise statement of Articles 2 and 85. His captors did not recognize the Geneva agreements, therefore stating they were not bound by any law because the United States had invaded Vietnam in an undeclared aggression against their people and homeland. Acting under these interpretations, the Vietnamese considered their American captors as falling under the policy for criminals of war, not prisoners. Both Articles, along with the reservations filed by the Vietnamese, immediately cast all prisoners as criminals without protection under international law and brought guilty charges of high crimes against the Vietnamese

people. As such, the prison camps became “political prisons,” whereby its American hostages were used to alter their mindsets, or, for political purposes, as bargaining chips. After word reached the States that the Vietnamese were using our military men in its propaganda war, the United States government began an effort to convince the Vietnamese that following the provisions of the Geneva Convention would be in their best interest. While these efforts were valiant, they were lacking in effort and very slow to take effect. In the meantime, our men were learning the painful truth about reality within their own confines.

The goal of the North Vietnamese captors was to force the Americans to abandon their former allegiances and obey the oppressive administrative authority. Rules were developed for these political prisons and given to the American captives. Following the same rules developed by the Chinese during the Korean War, the North Vietnamese determined that punishment would come first, with the proposed violation to be defined later. Two types of violations occurred within the camps: “discipline” and “system.” “Discipline” violations encompassed such charges as organizing escapes, spreading rumors, remaining imperialistic, or defecating in their pants as a result of dysentery. This particular act was seen by the camp authorities as an attempt by the Americans to destroy their clothing, and, therefore, was a punishable act. “System” violations were described as the use of books or magazines as toilet paper or wraps for cigarettes, holding unauthorized discussion sessions, communications between cells, or any activity that altered the acceptable “daily life” schedule. However, if anything other than what the camp authority wanted ensued, then it became a violation with the guarantee of punishment soon to follow.

The Code of Conduct. A military man’s creed. Name, rank, serial number, and date of birth, became known as the “Big Four.” Words a man could live by, and as the war in Vietnam proved no different from others, words to die by. Although the Vietnamese followed the examples of the Chinese on how to run a political prison, they took the examples one step farther by carefully studying the Code of Conduct established by the American military. As early as 1963, the Vietnamese were able to understand and recite back to their POWs the exact content and honorable intentions of the “Code.” In later

years, however, prisoners began hearing the rumor that the Code was useless, opposed by the American people, and would be changed by a new government as directed by the people when Nixon took office in November of 1968. An excellent strategy of the camp authorities was to give American POWs their own hard-line interpretation of the Code. They told the prisoners that if they gave a single piece of information other than the Big Four, then the Code had already been violated and further cooperation with camp authorities would be in the prisoners' best interests. Stating this interpretation, coupled with endless torture and abuse, obtained the information the Vietnamese wanted in many situations. Personal histories, oral or written confessions, whether true or false, appeals to other prisoners, propaganda broadcasts or recordings, or any other communications on behalf of the enemy or critical or harmful to the United States and/or persons affiliated with the same was considered a violation of the Code and a victory for the camp authority.

Despite threats and tortures, the American captives relished their own small victory against their captors by clinging to the established Code in several ways. Many prisoners battled the camp authority by writing or broadcasting statements that were so false and erroneous that interpretation of same often brought a moment of humor to fellow inmates. Minor "victories" such as these increased morale among the Americans and kept their spirits strong. These stories and writings, though totally fictitious, were believable by the North Vietnamese and therefore, more frequently than not, satisfied their demands. What frustrated the Vietnamese was their own inability to coerce information they felt critical to their own war efforts. As many former POWs have cited in their memoirs, the enemy had numerous methods for extracting any military secret they desired. The only drawback, fortunately for our men, was that the camp authorities didn't know the right questions to ask.

The main thrust for most American prisoners for holding out information was their loyalty to each other. Faith in God and the Code was essential and an endless supply of strength from which to draw during horrendous torture sessions. But above all was the need to return from interrogation and be able to look a fellow prisoner in the eye with both men knowing the limits had been met with utmost resistance. The first time each man was "broken"

by his captors, the majority reported an overwhelming guilt that swept over their agonized bodies in a pain more excruciating than the physical beatings they had just endured. A feeling of betrayal to their country, to their military honor, and to their own self-respect, let alone the feeling of betrayal of their fellow prisoners, was gut-wrenching and mentally devastating. The men felt no punishment could be more harsh than losing the respect of his peers and giving more information than the Big Four allowed. The obligation to withhold additional information kept most American prisoners hanging on through some of the worst torture sessions until they reached the point of collapsing. Once the communication process started, however, the newly captured prisoners learned that everyone before them had been broken, and each subsequent captive would eventually break under the severe extraction methods. This information from previous captors erased the self-inflicted pain to some extent, while time and learning the ways of a Prisoner of War would eventually heal the rest. The men had all done their best to withhold information, and that was all anyone could expect.

The “Hanoi Hilton,” as the main camp in North Vietnam was called, provided unbelievable living conditions. Placement within its walls became more of a test for survival than a prison, and numerous Americans never escaped the block walls and stench of the “Hilton.” The dark, dank cells that contained our men were barely large enough for one man, yet often times as many as four prisoners were forced into a cell approximately five feet by eight feet with one “personal bucket” to be shared by all. Each man was given a woven reed mat upon which to lie, and if he was lucky and complied with requests from the authorities, he received a single sackcloth blanket to wrap in against the bone-chilling winds of winter. More often than not, the cells were infested with rats and other crawling creatures and had no windows or light to dispel the bleak loneliness within. The doors were usually heavy wooden structures with a metal peephole, which remained shut unless a guard opened it for viewing the prisoners or delivering food. The prisoners were allowed to leave the room, if compliance was satisfactory, once a day to bathe in cold water and clean their personal buckets or wash their clothes. Many times, however, the men would remain in their cells for days on end without light, fresh water, baths, or fresh air to cleanse their lungs

and lighten their spirits. Some cells had a single light bulb that hung suspended from the rafters above, but was only allowed to be turned on during certain times of the day, while in others the light emitted a dim glow twenty-four hours a day.

Food containers consisted of a water jug for each man, a tin or wooden bowl for the little food they received, and sometimes a tin cup for drinking. Their daily meals consisted mainly of a watery green soup with little or no measurable contents. Called “sewer greens,” this green, leafy weed, similar to water lilies, was a wild plant that flourished among the slime and algae in the waste ponds surrounding the camps and was used to make the soup. The greens were foul tasting and tough, but became somewhat of a treat when small pieces were found floating in the broth. On occasion, a rare delicacy was discovered in the soup, which might consist of a piece of fat meat, a drowned roach or bug of some kind, or a small piece of vegetable. The soup would be accompanied by a little chunk of bread or a very small portion of rice and served only twice a day around noon and early evening. No other nourishment was available throughout their endless days of captivity. For the lucky prisoners, an American holiday would bring a feast to their starving bodies. The camp authorities would have some type of meat, usually wild turkey, canned pork, or gibbon (monkey) prepared for their meals. In addition to the meat, the prisoners were provided with a piece of vegetable, extra bread or rice, and, on occasion, a piece of fruit or a morsel of hard candy or chocolate. To their starving tongues, these meals were fit for a king, and they ate ravenously, but the end result almost always invoked a severe case of dysentery or diarrhea. Within a day or two after these meals, the personal buckets of each cell would be overflowing and crawling with maggots or tapeworms passed by the men. Regardless of their efforts, the American prisoners suffered continuously with internal worms, infections, and bodily functions that shut down from lack of proper nourishment. After a short period of time in captivity, it became an effort in survival just to retain any positive effects from the meals they received.

Living conditions for those POWs kept in the jungle camps were even worse. An assortment of “cells” existed depending upon the location of the camp and the severity of punishment rendered, or was simply determined by the desires of the camp commander. The

typical jungle hut was a bamboo structure, usually built low to the ground in the shape of a lean-to, where the poles were tied together with hemp vines or thin strips of bamboo. When the sun dried out the strips, camp guards would pour water on the bindings to make them swell and prevent the poles from becoming loose. The roof was most often covered with palm fronds or was a thatch-roofed from elephant grass. There was also a "gate" of sorts affixed to the front of the structure and was locked and/or interlaced with barbwire to prevent escape. In these particular structures, the bare ground was the flooring. In certain instances, the prisoners were given a woven mat to lay on the ground and usually a mosquito net to hang over them at night, but these were pure luxury items to many. The average dimensions of this particular unit were approximately four to five feet wide and about three feet tall on the high end, while running to the ground on the other.

One of the greatest hazards for the captives was the animals that had easy access to the lean-tos. Snakes were plentiful in the jungles, especially two deadly varieties of the cobra family. The Vietnamese considered snake meat a delicacy and had great pleasure when the slimy creatures would find the warm bodies of our men and crawl into their huts. If one of the prisoners would start screaming about a snake, many times the guards would start running, then just stand and laugh at the terror of the man who was trapped. Eventually, when the snake left the hut, the Vietnamese would kill it and share in a feast for dinner. In addition to the snakes, poisonous spiders and lizards, biting ants, the endless supply of mosquitoes, rats, and, of course, leeches, plagued the men on a daily basis.

A second type of structure used in the jungles was a bamboo cage supported on stilts. This particular cell was made completely of bamboo poles and was rectangular in shape. The dimensions were approximately three by four by eight feet, yet designed where the occupant could sit up but not stand. The men in these structures seldom had the protection of a mosquito net and rarely even had a mat to lie upon. These "boxes" were normally used during times of harsh punishment. Although not always the case, in most circumstances, the men were not allowed out of these cages for anything. They defecated through the slats of bamboo, were not allowed to bathe for months on end, and were only allowed out to clean the urine

from beneath the box. This was a practice that didn't happen very often, either, so the men would sit above their own waste for weeks on end.

Probably the most cruel and inhumane device used to house prisoners was "the cage." This particular unit was also made entirely of bamboo and then suspended from tree limbs so it hung about three feet above the ground. Smaller than the other units, the cage was normally three by three by four feet. Within these confines, many of the Americans, being large in size compared to the Vietnamese, didn't have enough room to sit down completely, nor could they stand upright. After months of this cramped confinement, the prisoners frequently lost the use of their legs due to a lack of proper circulation. Those men unfortunate enough to be held captive in this manner many times sustained permanent damage to their limbs. No mosquito nets were given, and certainly no other "luxuries" were available to these prisoners. Despite the severity of the cage itself, a favorite pastime for the guards was to twist and swing the cage endlessly as a form of torture. Another favorite was to jab the trapped men inside with sharpened sticks or rap on the bamboo back and forth with a stick or baton each time they passed. When the camp decided to move to another location, the men in the cages were forced to carry or drag their "houses" through the jungle, despite their deteriorated physical conditions. The only exception to this would come if a prisoner was so near death that he, too, had to be carried.

"Charlie" was very effective in his methods of torture. Many times when a man refused to reveal the desired information to the Viet Cong (VC), he would be tortured in front of the others in the hopes that seeing the cruel punishment to a fellow American would force someone else to talk. The prisoners were beaten severely with bamboo sticks, rifle butts, and tree limbs. They would be burned by hot coals from a smoldering fire, have their fingernails pulled out, or, if they were caught trying to pass information, their hands would be stomped severely by Charlie's feet until they were crushed and rendered useless. With the feet of prisoners locked securely in stocks, the VC would beat them constantly for sheer pleasure, usually breaking the bones and crippling the prisoners for months and even years. Other forms of torture included having the men tied

in ropes that wrapped around their ankles, looped over their necks, then tied to their wrists while their arms were behind their backs. After being securely tied, the men were often times suspended from a hook or other device and hung upside down, which placed their bodies in excruciating pain for hours on end. Also while being held in the “ropes,” the Vietnamese guards would frequently twist the men’s arms or press them further past their heads to inflict even more pain. After prolonged exposure to the ropes, the arms and hands of the prisoners would lose all circulation, and their limbs would turn black and become numb. Although the numbness was a relief at times, the POW then dreaded having the ropes removed, as feeling would return to their limbs, and the excruciating pain would begin again. Many prisoners still retain the scars of the cutting ropes and have limited use or nerve damage even today.

Some captives even reported being buried alive, exposing only their neck and head to the multitudes of mosquitoes and biting ants that covered their raw flesh, and left in this condition for days on end. Other men were locked in solitary confinement for months, even years, without any word from another fellow prisoner. Solitary usually meant no light at all, no baths, very little food, and certainly no exercise from the tiny black cells in which they were kept. The varieties of tortures were unlimited, and in most situations, even beyond belief.

I’ve come to realize from conversations with others concerning the conditions of imprisonment of our military personnel in Vietnam that the general public seriously has no clue as to the severity of treatment those men received. They wrinkle their noses and listen with bated fascination to the grim details. Statements follow the quick history lesson such as “Oh, how awful,” and “I can’t imagine living like that.” Concern is shown for these ex-POWs, hearts go out to them for the pain and suffering they endured, but, in the end, does it really matter? You’re damned right it does!

The supreme sacrifice an individual can bestow upon his country and its inhabitants is his life. More than fifty-eight thousand men gave their lives during the Vietnam conflict, and even one life, in this writer’s opinion, was too much. We can add, however, another 566 names to this list. These are names of all military POWs who served time in prison camps and were later released, because they,

too, gave their lives to this country and the American people. Yes, they're alive and living throughout the four corners of this nation, but what kind of life has it been? Every single day since their release, these men have endured the nightmares and painful memories that have plagued their every waking moment. They bravely wear smiles upon their faces, laugh with their families and friends, and overall have led a pretty normal life... at least to the peering eyes of others. But what we, the masses, as free people within the United States, do not understand is that beyond the smiles and laughs of these gallant men lies the smoldering remains of ghosts too real to comprehend. While the rest of us take for granted the simple pleasures of freedom afforded to us by this great nation, we simply *must* remember our POWs and Veterans from *all* wars and the sacrifice of their own lives for our freedom. Not a single man who saw and confronted the enemy on a battlefield and returned in the end has remained untouched by his experiences. The cost, be it great or small, left its mark on these men, and there it will forever remain until their last breath is drawn. Inasmuch, we, the American people, until *our* last breath is drawn, should try to understand these sacrifices and thank God that when the Call to Arms is heralded, the best men in the world answer the call.