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Air War College

PROBLEMS OF COMMAND IN A PRISONER OF WAR SITUATION

PROFESSIONAL STUDY

No. 5433 **By** John E. Stavast

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AIR WAR COLLEGE
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REPORT NO. 5433

PROBLEMS OF COMMAND IN A PRISONER OF WAR SITUATION

or

LANCER TO CHARLIE, CHARLIE

by

John E. Stavast, [redacted] PII Redacted
Colonel, USAF

AN ARTICLE FOR PUBLICATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY

MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE, ALABAMA Letter on file

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AIR WAR COLLEGE REPORT SUMMARY

No. 5433

TITLE: Problems of Command in a Prisoner of War Situation

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An account of the author's personal experiences while detained as a POW in the DRVN from 17 Sep 1967 until 14 Mar 1973. This paper illustrates the problems that faced the POWs each day, their need for communication and organization, and then points out some problems peculiar to the SRO (Senior Ranking Officer).

The author was held in six of the NVN POW camps. He was the SRO in four different camps and was a Commander of four different POW Squadrons.

His experiences have shown him that the old, generally accepted rules of leadership are valid in a POW situation.

GLOSSARY

for

LANCER TO CHARLIE CHARLIE

Lancer	My call sign as SRO.
Charlie Charlie	Code for messages addressed to all hands.
Comm	Communications or communicate.
Comming	Communicating
Quiz	Any interrogation, or "visit" with a NVN interrogator.
Cup-talk	To communicate through a wall, talking into a cup.
V	The North Vietnamese guards or officers.
SRO	Senior Ranking Officer, or POW commander.

LANCER TO CHARLIE CHARLIE

I am writing this article because 1) so many people are interested in the day to day problems we faced as POWs, and 2) because those problems faced by the leaders in that situation were unique and should be of considerable interest and importance to any military man who may one day be faced with living in a communist jail.

To cover all of the details as they occurred would require volumes, and already some volumes have been written about our days as POWs. In an attempt to keep this from becoming another volume, I will proceed chronologically through my experiences and point out only those problems which were most significant and some unique to the SRO.

Captured

On 17 September 1967, my RF4C had a mid-air collision with a surface to air missile (SAM). My navigator, Captain Jerry Venanzi and I ejected, landing about 25 miles southwest of Hanoi. We were soon captured and taken individually to an army camp very near Hoa Binh. During the 4 to 5 hours it took to get to Hoa Binh, I was not mis-treated in any way by the men who captured me. However, my arrival at the Hoa Binh Army Barracks set off an almost continuous chain of problems that would last me for the next 5½ years.

When I met the official "welcoming committee," I was almost immediately tortured for failing to "properly report," i.e., I did not bow and I refused to get on my knees. After this brief but violent introduction to a completely hostile world, I was blindfolded and tied, and then Jerry and I were jeeped to Hanoi. It was very late at night when we arrived at the large dungeon known as the "Hanoi Hilton." Jerry and I were taken to separate cells, not to meet again face to face for five years.

The cell I arrived in was a torture chamber. It had a desk, chair, a spotlight, some very irritable Vietnamese, and the torture tools of their trade. They were real pros. I spent one week in that room, with no food, very little water, and no sleep. There were several times when I really thought that I was a goner. At the end of that week, they apparently gave up on me without getting the primary things they wanted-----a map of my base, a list of the aircrews in my squadron, a confession that I was a "war-criminal," and other less important items. When I left that room, I was hurting, I mean really hurting. Every bone and muscle ached. Both arms and hands were numb, a fantastic headache plagued my vision and I was too run down to care about food. (It was later determined that they had broken my right arm, both ear drums, my right tympanic ear bones, and they didn't do my back, broken during ejection, any good.) I hesitated to mention these things, but do so to emphasize the toughest problem the American POWs had to face in NVN. Many were injured more severely than I had been.

"Normal Camp Routine"

After I was finished with that initial interrogation, I was moved into a part of the complex now known as "Heartbreak." There I was kept under close surveillance, and regained my appetite. I was introduced to the kind of lifestyle I would follow for the next five and ½ years. Thank Heaven that I didn't know that it would take that much longer.

Before going further, it might be a good idea to explain the camp set-up in and around the Hanoi area. Of the several camps in or near Hanoi, the "Hilton," or properly, Hoa Lo, was the largest. Inside its walls were several separate areas where Americans were, at one time or another, detained. You may have heard reference to "Little Vegas," "Heartbreak Hotel," "New Guy Village" or "Unity." All of these were inside the large central prison of Hoa Lo. Hoa Lo was right downtown. Two of the other large camps in Hanoi were the "Zoo plus its "Zoo Annex," and the "Plantation." The "Zoo" and the "Annex" were out about 5½ miles southwest of downtown Hanoi. The "Plantation," however, was also close to downtown, just at the Hanoi side of the "Doumer Bridge," and any rail traffic that crossed that bridge also rattled past the "Plant." (You Gents that hit that bridge, rattled our teeth whereever we were in Hanoi, but you really rattled the "Plantation.")

Now, back to "Heartbreak." Since I was subjected to very close scrutiny, I would not have had the opportunity to establish contact with anyone, even if I had known how. While there, I received a set of the "camp regulations," and this caused a considerable number of problems for me, and of course, all of us. Simply because, if followed, they would force us to violate our Code of Conduct. They were quite strict. In general terms, they said, "No talking--Must not communicate with others in the camp---Must obey all orders of the guards-----Must answer fully all questions from the guards or officers of the camp-----Must bow when meeting any Vietnamese in the camp"--- (don't think that one didn't cause some real sore bones.) The stipulations also told what to do in the event of an air raid, ("get under your bunk"). According to these regulations, we also had to show a good attitude towards the guards.

As you can easily see, these regulations were designed to allow regular, if not continuous harassment. They were also designed to seriously hamper any attempts at organization. Any alleged violation of the regulations always brought "punishment." The demands of our captors were often considered to be so ridiculous, that we had a difficult time realizing that they were serious, even when being punished for alleged "crimes." We had to adjust, and adjust rapidly, to the childish (so it often seemed) demands and restrictions imposed by our jailors. A big problem for all of us, was adjusting to this completely hostile environment whose laws were incomprehensible to us. It seemed to me that most of the North Vietnamese officers and guards were almost always, in some way, attempting their own little revenge or vendetta on each American. Each had his own tale, true or not, about family or friend killed in the war. It was surprising to me that so many of our interrogators were born and raised in the south. (An obvious attempt to gain sympathy for their cause. One officer had told us about his wife and children dying in a South VietNam village--and then on the very next TET, he showed up with them in the camp.)

Why Communicate?

With all of the difficulties that were placed in our way, the isolation, the continuous harassment, and the continuous surveillance, you might ask--"Why bother trying to get organized, or trying to communicate?" I think that the primary reason was that we, like most Americans, were gregarious and just wanted a friendly contact someplace, anyplace in that maddeningly unfriendly jail. Perhaps, after what we had all been through, we realized that there must be others who were sick or hurt, and in need of some good strong American moral support. I think we all subconsciously realized that we needed some moral support.

After one month in "Heartbreak," I was trundled off to a "new" camp, blindfold and all. There I was to meet my first friendly face---my first room-mate--Bill. Although we were delighted to have a roommate, we were still pretty much down in the dumps. We found that our experiences were much alike---continuous harassment, almost daily attitude check "quizes"--during which time the Vietnamese tried to convince us that we should do "something for the camp--to show a good attitude." (These quizes usually resulted in punishment being meted out because of "bad attitude"). (We all grew to be quite proud of our "bad attitudes.") Even so, we were happy to have someone to talk to, and we discussed at length, the situation, our backgrounds, and the story of our shootdown, etc, etc, etc. Too, we became ever more curious about the others we knew must be close by, and so the urge to communicate with the others grew.

After a week together in "Little Vegas," we were one night moved with little fanfare to a new camp. (Our moves were almost always conducted, or at least started at night, with blindfolds affixed and handcuffs in place. And, perhaps it was coincidence, but most of our moves were conducted on either the 14th or 29th of the month). The new camp was the "Zoo Annex," and although I didn't realize it at the time, I was the SRO.

The "Zoo Annex" was made up of numerous two room storage type buildings. Each room had its own small courtyard that measured about 10'X15', with a deep water well for bathing. The rooms measured about 15'X18' and the walls had no windows and were one meter thick. There were floor level vents, with a small vent well, that opened through the wall in about three places around the room. Through these, we could just barely see something of the outside. Bill and I were fairly certain that there were others in the room just three feet through the brick wall, but there was no known way to make sensible contact with them. (We had yet to learn the tap-code). We did occasionally tap on the wall, but never received any response.

First Successes

Another move in November, 1967, saw Bill and me meeting those in the next room. More good friends, Ed and Chuck increased the circle of our society. Of course, we were again delighted to meet some new faces, and to have more new things to talk about. It was here, that after much trial and error, we established contact with other groups of American POWs in our immediate area. Although Ed had learned the tap-code in a previous camp, there was no way to tap to the other buildings (again, tapping on the wall had ended in no results. I guess it was too damn thick). In any event, with all our heads together, we came up with the idea of writing on our "utility paper," using a toothpaste tube as a pencil. I believe that was Chuck's idea. We wrote the note, tied it around a chunk of broken brick, and then hid it until we would have the opportunity to get outside and throw it to another courtyard. In it, we gave our names (which was always very important) the comm code, and a schedule for tossing the notes back and forth. Each time we wrote a note, it had to be well hidden as the Vietnamese inspected our rooms often, on an irregular schedule. (Another form of harassment). The very first time we threw a note to another room, it worked. We established contact with another room in a building across from ours. Almost at the same time, we made contact with the room next to us via a peep hole in the wall.

These very simple, yet tremendous successes, caused a rise in our morale that was difficult to explain, but was easily detected. It was immediately apparent that communications were very important to us, and it was easy to see how important it could be to some poor soul or souls who might be kept in solitary confinement.

As other moves occurred, and our list of acquaintances grew, our communications became more practiced and sophisticated. We were now using the tap code, notes on paper and sometimes plates, and we occasionally could talk directly to individuals on outside garden detail by speaking through the vents. We were caught a lot, and punished for our efforts, but not too severely. By the time I left the "Annex," we still had not been able to contact all buildings and our "organization" wasn't really very much as we spent most of our efforts just attempting to contact those other buildings. A large group of us were moved to the "ZOO" in May of 1968.

The Zoo

Ed and I moved into a rather small room in the building called the "Poolhall." It was about 8' by 8' and had two very small openings or vents way up by the ceiling. We were immediately contacted by the "old heads" and found the "Zoo" to be well organized with good comm. There, we had the opportunity to use our cups for "cup-talk." By placing our metal cups against the wall, in a pre-determined spot, by talking directly into the cup you could transmit the sound through the brick wall to an ear on the other side. It was rather like an old telephone, but it worked. There was an established schedule for comm, and we really increased our list of known POWs. We got to know many of them quite well, although we never had the opportunity to meet personally until after we were released.

The Vietnamese were making continuous attempts to cut out all comm between us POWs. There were several "Comm-purges," and POWs caught or accused of comming were punished rather severely. The Vietnamese hung blinds from the roof eaves to block the view from one building to another. They even laid more brick atop existing brick walls that separated courtyards. The V apparently did not want our organization to unite in resisting their increasing efforts at gaining propaganda from any unwary POW.

The risks taken by all the POWs in the "Zoo" at that time were considerable, but the effort to keep our comm lines open were successful. We relied on the comm net to tell us who was being singled out by the V, and then we used the system to give him encouragement. This kept everyone's morale quite high, considering the circumstances. Any POW who had had a quiz would send out the particulars of that quiz through the comm net. This kept everyone up to date on the latest V tactics and programs. Our comm allowed us to present a unified resistance posture, and this at times confounded and infuriated the V--which was also very good for our morale.

Even though we could not maintain continuous contact with those held in solitary confinement, what little we could get through to them helped them keep their courage and resistance up. Even with no contact, the solo POW knew the rules because of his previous comm experience.

Worth The Risks

The V did come up with some changes in tactics that occasionally surprised us, but generally, their intent was always the same: to gain propaganda value from an individual POW or group of POWs. There were a few POWs who were seldom or never tortured. They may have been more trusting toward the V motives if our comm net had not kept everyone informed of any "punishment" meted out by the V, both in the past and in the present. I believe that information about the V passed through our comm net kept many POWs from falling for a V propaganda trap.

That's why, when the "new guys" started arriving in 1971-72, our organization went to considerable effort to establish contact with them. First off, it gave them considerable moral support just to know that there were other Americans there, and then we let them know what they were up against and how they could and should resist the enemy's tactics. For those we contacted, it worked, and we think it was well worth the risks involved.

Because of different camp layouts, the obstacles were somewhat different in the various camps, but the need for organization was always there and so, communications existed. The V never wanted us to organize, so they suppressed our comm all of the time in all of the camps until just before we left Hanoi for home. There was no way they could stop it completely, or in some cases even partially, without going to a sustained expensive effort, and they seemed incapable of that, but they did keep after us, and that kept us on our toes.

SRO Problems

Many of the problems I have discussed were, of course, problems for the SRO. It fell to him, in the early days to establish the routine procedures that would eventually evolve into a posture of persistent resistance. Usually the V knew (or found out) who the SRO was in each camp and building, and they then proceeded to see to it that he was treated a little rougher and was less comfortable than the other POWs. In the early days, prior to the fall of 1969, my camp SRO was tortured for days to try and get him to change his ways and break up our organization. They, of course, "punished" him for many of his crimes, and any resistance was a crime.

In the 70s, the SROs were usually only harassed a little more than the others, but some of our seniors were kept in chains and irons until after the middle of 1971.

The SRO had comm needs like any commander has, but it required considerably more time to get a message out through the wall, window, vent or however, to the end of the comm line. Most of the time, there was little that was urgent, but when something was urgent, it was very frustrating having to wait to get your traffic out and again to get the answers back.

Besides using comm to pass out policies, receive ideas from others, keep up to date on the V, etc., there were some other important uses for a good comm net. After each move or intra-camp shuffle, we wanted to know WHO was where. It was important to get quick information whenever the V would single out a particular squadron (building) for either harassment or exploitation. There were certain sensitive activities that the SRO had to keep track of. Our requirement for comm lasted about an hour each day, once things were settled down. We usually did not comm on Sundays.

The SRO had to be a mature, level-headed individual, who could apply the classic principles of good leadership that would get the mission accomplished, which was, simply stated, "Home With Honor." The good SRO found out quite rapidly that living with your subordinates for 24 hours per day, 7 days a week, for weeks, months, and even years will necessitate that military courtesy and discipline be somewhat modified in application. You can't sit on your behind and issue forth the dictums that will handle any or all situations, you have to live the problem. You MUST--listen to your men, wash your share of the dishes, do your own clean-up, and help serve the chow, and especially, be the one who will talk back to the V (enemy). There's a saying that "Familiarity breeds contempt." I can't think of circumstances more familiar than those we had in jail, and yet I know of no contempt or dis-respect that came of our close conditions.

Every Man A Good SRO

Actually, who the SRO was, was not all that important. Every POW I knew, knew for himself what was required, and any of them would have been a good SRO. Before we were finally all in one camp, we had all lived by the Code of Conduct, and I do not know one man who did not do his best. I am really proud of my association with all I knew in the Hanoi Hilton!

Nevertheless, the SROs were the central guides through our difficult times. Once organized, the melding of ideas from all concerned, combined with the SRO's leadership and direction made our resistance program so successful that our mission, Home With Honor, was easily fulfilled.