

at the 'Hanoi Hilton'

Four former students recall captivity

By Daniel A. La Bry
Section Co-Editor

For several years the "Hanoi Hilton" provided room and board to four former students of Texas A&M — but it was no vacation.

The Aggies were prisoners of war in North Vietnam. The "Hanoi Hilton" was a nickname for North Vietnam's main penitentiary, Hoa Lo prison, located in the middle of Hanoi.

Robert Norlan Daughtrey, who left A&M his junior year in 1955 to enter aviation cadet training, was captured Aug. 2, 1965, minutes after he ejected from his crippled F-105 during his 16th mission. Daughtrey suffered two broken arms during the ejection.

"I was being thrown around in the cockpit quite a bit," Daughtrey said. "When I ejected, my right arm hit the canopy rail on the way out. My left arm hit the seat due to the wind blast."

Daughtrey, held captive for 7½ years, said he was captured almost immediately after reaching the ground.

"I was wondering whether I was going to live or die," he said. "Then they (the North Vietnamese) gave me a little medical aid, and I figured they planned to keep me for a little while."

James Edwin Ray, Class of '63, was captured May 8, 1966 after he ejected from his burning F-105. Ray's aircraft was shot down on Mother's Day.

The Americans discovered Ray, held captive for six years and nine months, was a prisoner two months after he was shot down when Radio Hanoi broadcasted the alleged "confessions" of his crimes against the North Vietnamese people.

Ray wore his Aggie ring and a Memorial Student Center leadership watch into combat. In the July 1973 issue of the Texas Aggie, Ray said he thought he was invincible at the time and wouldn't be shot down. The North Vietnamese took the pieces of jewelry, and Ray hasn't seen them since.

John Charles Blevins, Class of '61, was captured Sept. 9, 1966 after his F-105 was hit by anti-aircraft fire. Search missions failed to spot Blevins. He was a POW for nearly 3½ years before his family learned of his status.

"On my 90th mission, I was shot down about 40 miles north of Hanoi over a railroad bridge, which was a target at the time," Blevins said. "I was captured within about two hours after I was shot down."

"I was hoping it was going to be a short war."

Blevins, held captive for 6½ years, said he wasn't expecting any rescue efforts since he was shot down so far inland.

"I had to decide whether or not I would have a shoot-out with my captors," he said. "I decided I didn't have anything to gain by doing that since it wouldn't have much of an effect on the enemy."

Alton Benno Meyer, Class of '60, was captured April 26, 1967 after his F-105 was hit by a missile. Meyer suffered a broken right leg.

"I was shot down about 60 miles northwest of Hanoi," Meyer said.

Meyer, held captive for almost six years, said his situation was rather bleak at the time and there wasn't much he could do.

All four Aggies were officers in the U.S. Air Force and were pilots of F-105 aircraft.

About 75 percent of the air strikes against North Vietnam were carried out by F-105 aircraft, which flew some of the toughest missions during the war.

Daughtrey, Ray, Blevins and Meyer all were stationed in Thailand immediately before they were captured.

The four spent the majority of their captivity in Hoa Lo prison.

American prisoners routinely were circulated to other prison camps in North Vietnam. The North Vietnamese tried to destroy a prisoner's resistance and break down his morale by isolating him and making him feel as if he had been forgotten.

American POWs were held in several different camps in North Vietnam.

The "Hanoi Hilton," "Alcatraz," the "Zoo" and the

"Plantation" were in Hanoi. Six more prison camps were within 50 miles of Hanoi and one, "Dogpatch," was in the northern mountains, five miles from the China border.

Meyer said, "They (the facilities in Hoa Lo) were fairly crude. It was sort of like a dungeon."

"The cells had concrete bunks with stocks at the feet and little peep-holes where the guards passed the food through and looked in. They were quite filthy."

At one point and time, all four Aggies were located in the same camp. Because of the North Vietnamese's strict communication rules, information on other prisoners was not easy to come by.

Meyer said, "The Vietnamese took a lot of pains to keep us from seeing each other and talking to each other."

"I had a cellmate who had been cellmates with Blevins and he told me that Blevins was from A&M."

Next to word-of-mouth, the most efficient method of communication for the prisoners was a special code of the alphabet that was used in all the camps.

Tapping was the most common method of transmission, but Daughtrey said prisoners would use every opportunity they had to communicate. He said everything from dragging of sandals, to sweeping with a broom, to tying knots in a string was used to transmit the code.

Communicating with other prisoners was met with severe punishment when prisoners were caught.

Some of the notorious prison personnel who participated in the punishments received interesting nicknames from the prisoners.

"Pigeye," also known as "Straps and Bars" for his favorite working tools, was believed to torture more American prisoners than any other member of the Hanoi prison system.

Other prominent personnel included "Soft Soap Fairy," "Spot," the "Rat" and "Frenchy."

The North Vietnamese viewed and treated the American prisoners as criminals.

Blevins said, "They had a propaganda stance that considered us as criminals, and they refused to give us the Geneva Convention's conditions agreed to by all nations during wartime."

"They were continually pressuring people for propaganda purposes."

Meyer said, "I had a broken leg at the time, so they just threw me on the floor of the cell and didn't put me on the bunk."

The North Vietnamese put a cast on Meyer's right leg and performed some surgery, he said.

"Since I had a broken leg and wasn't in too good of shape, there was not much they could do to torture me," he said. "As soon as they would start to work on me, I would pass out on them."

"It's pretty hard to torture someone who is unconscious."

Ray, who is stationed in Rome and was unavailable for comment, said in a 1979 *Battalion* article that he and other prisoners were tortured to destroy their morale and force them to give information and write phony confessions.

Ray said he credits part of his survival to his training in A&M's Corps of Cadets. He said he remembered being harassed as a freshman and would tell himself that his captors couldn't do better than those sophomores who harassed him at A&M.

In August 1967, the North Vietnamese moved Ray and 13 other prisoners into the Hanoi Power Plant in an attempt to prevent the United States from bombing the plant.

Ray said the mental pressure of being at the plant was strenuous and, although he sometimes feared for his life, his spirit was lifted and encouraged when he heard the bombs start to fall.

In November 1970, most of the prisons around Hanoi were abandoned as a result of a U.S. attack on a prison camp northwest of Hanoi.

A team of 70 U.S. Army Special Forces troops raided the Son Tay prison camp in hopes of rescuing American prisoners. To their dismay upon arrival, the troops failed to find a single American prisoner. The POWs located at Son Tay already had been



moved to another camp in one of the North Vietnamese's routine rotations.

Fearful of another U.S. attempt to rescue any POWs, the North Vietnamese moved most of the American prisoners to Hoa Lo because of its high security.

A series of three concrete walls, 15 to 20 feet high, surrounded the inner buildings of Hoa Lo. Broken glass was cemented into the surface of the walls, and electrical wires covered the perimeter.

Hoa Lo contained four major areas, all named by the American POWs: "Heartbreak Hotel," "New Guy Village," "Las Vegas" and "Camp Unity." Prisoners were frequently circulated among the different areas of Hoa Lo.

"Heartbreak Hotel" was a tomblike building with eight individual cells, one which was used as a washing area. Each cell contained two cement bunks with barely enough room to walk between them.

The bunks were two feet wide. At the bottom of each bunk, a set of iron stocks was embedded into the cement. Prisoners' feet were locked in the stocks and their arms were handcuffed behind their backs for punishment.

The "Heartbreak Area" contained the "knobby room" where the walls were covered with knobs of acoustical plaster to absorb the screams of men being tortured.

"New Guy Village" was the smallest area in the prison. It was mainly for interrogation and torture.

"Las Vegas" was an assortment of cells ranging from four-man units, to two-man units, to cells that were about 3 feet by 6 feet. These small cells contained a hardwood bed on one wall that left less than a 1-foot-by-6-foot area to walk and exercise in.

"Las Vegas" was used for long and brutal incarceration.

"Camp Unity" was a cheerful place compared to the other areas of the prison. It consisted of nine cell blocks that housed about 40 prisoners each.

Regular church services were started in each cell by the prisoners in "Camp Unity" after several confrontations with prison guards.

Church services were one of several improvements in the treatment of prisoners.

The improvements began in the late 1960s after:

- The death of North Vietnam President Ho Chi Minh.

- Increased American bomb raids.

Daughtrey and Ray were among that first group of prisoners released Feb. 12, and Blevins and Meyer were released March 4.