

Ronald Reagan Presidential Library
Digital Library Collections

This is a PDF of a folder from our textual collections.

WHORM Subject File Code: CO172
(Countries: Vietnam, Socialist Republic of)
Case file Number(s): 600000-604999
Box Number: 221

To see more digitized collections visit:

<https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/digitized-textual-material>

To see all Ronald Reagan Presidential Library inventories visit:

<https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/white-house-inventories>

Contact a reference archivist at: **reagan.library@nara.gov**

Citation Guidelines: <https://reaganlibrary.gov/archives/research-support/citation-guide>

National Archives Catalogue: <https://catalog.archives.gov/>

Washington, D.C. 20520

6571

SEPTEMBER 10, 1988

600945

C0172

FG006-12

MEMORANDUM FOR MR. COLIN L. POWELL
THE WHITE HOUSESUBJECT: Letter to President Reagan from Mr. Michael Bengé

Mr. Bengé wrote the President on July 14 to register dissatisfaction over the treatment of civilian government employees who died or were held as prisoners of war in Vietnam. Previously, Mr. Bengé also wrote Vice President Bush on the same subject. I have attached copies of that correspondence.

Attached for the President's signature is a brief reply to Mr. Bengé, which I recommend that he sign.

Melvyn Levitsky
for Melvyn Levitsky
Executive Secretary

Attachments:

- Tab 1 - Draft Letter to Mr. Bengé from the President
- Tab 2 - Letter from Mr. Bengé
- Tab 3 - Correspondence between Vice President Bush and Mr. Bengé

NSC # 8806571

9/13/88

~~Donovan~~

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

Clark -

This went to DOD, then to State, then back here. The State draft is a nice letter, but I'm not sure it answers the mail. At any rate, I believe something needs to be said about the legislative wording which specified military personnel and put the monkey where it belongs - Congress.

Dick

Department of State

Draft Reply

Dear Mr. Bengé:

Thank you for your letter of July 14, 1988, regarding civilian employees who served in Vietnam. It is certainly true that our country's mission in Vietnam relied on the efforts of both military and civilian personnel. Those like you who had the misfortune to be held as prisoners of war know full well that all of our citizens who served in Vietnam did so at great personal sacrifice.

I believe that this sentiment is widely held. The crowds who regularly throng the Vietnam Memorial view it as a shrine to the soldiers, sailors and airmen who gave their lives in that conflict. But I believe that most Americans feel that the Memorial has a significance that reaches beyond that worthy cause. For them, it symbolizes America's recognition of the service and sacrifice rendered by all Americans involved in the war, military or civilian, living or dead.

I understand that since your release from captivity you have become an expert of world renown on reforestation, and that the projects and programs in which you have so often played a leading role are helping to improve the lives of thousands around the world. I have no doubt that your work,

added to the contributions you made during your assignment to Vietnam, are making the world a better place for mankind. Allow me to add my congratulations to a long and distinguished list.

Sincerely,

Ronald Reagan

Mr. Michael D. Bengel,
2300 Pimmit Drive, #604-W,
Falls Church, Virginia.

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

MEMORANDUM

DATE: 7/23/88

TO: Dick Chidress

ACTION:

- Review/Approval
- Recommendation
- Information Copy
- Draft Reply
- As we discussed

DATE ACTION NEEDED:

COMMENT: The accounts of this man's
misery suggest why he's miffed.
Have any suggestions on where a
reply might be drafted?

Chuck

CHARLES A. DONOVAN
Presidential Correspondence
Room 94, OEOB - x7610

30
file 10 # 058 638
312 993

July 14, 1988

President Ronald Reagan
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave. N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

2 AD
Dear Mr. President:

I wish to bring to your attention an inequity about which I am sure you are unaware: the honoring of Armed Forces Personnel who were prisoners of war (POWs) by presenting them with a Presidential Medal, while not recognizing those civilian government employees who were also POWs and served our country as honorably and suffered as much.* For example, there were a number Foreign Service Officers of such agencies as the State Department, CIA and the Agency for International Development (A.I.D.) who were incarcerated and many more who died in Viet Nam.

inc.
Civilian government employees are often berated while those in uniform are given medals. The 58,156 names on the wall of the Viet Nam Memorial are those of only U.S. armed forces personnel. There are no names of civilians killed while serving in an official capacity from various government agencies. A.I.D. alone lost 37 killed in Viet Nam.

The Government has chosen to single out and honor the nurses who served in Viet Nam with a statue (deservedly so), while civilian government employees who served and died there are being forgotten. There were more A.I.D. people who served in Viet Nam than nurses--and 37 A.I.D. people were killed while eight nurses were.

I am sure that it has just been an oversight that civilian Foreign Service Officers who were Prisoners of War were not awarded the Presidential Medal and that you will want to eliminate this inequity.

Sincerely,

Michael D. Benge

Michael D. Benge
2300 Pimmit Drive, #604-W
Falls Church, VA 22043

*I was captured in South Viet Nam while rescuing a number of Americans and was incarcerated by the North Vietnamese for over five years while serving as an economic advisor to the South Vietnamese Government for the Agency for International Development--1968-73 (see enclosed).

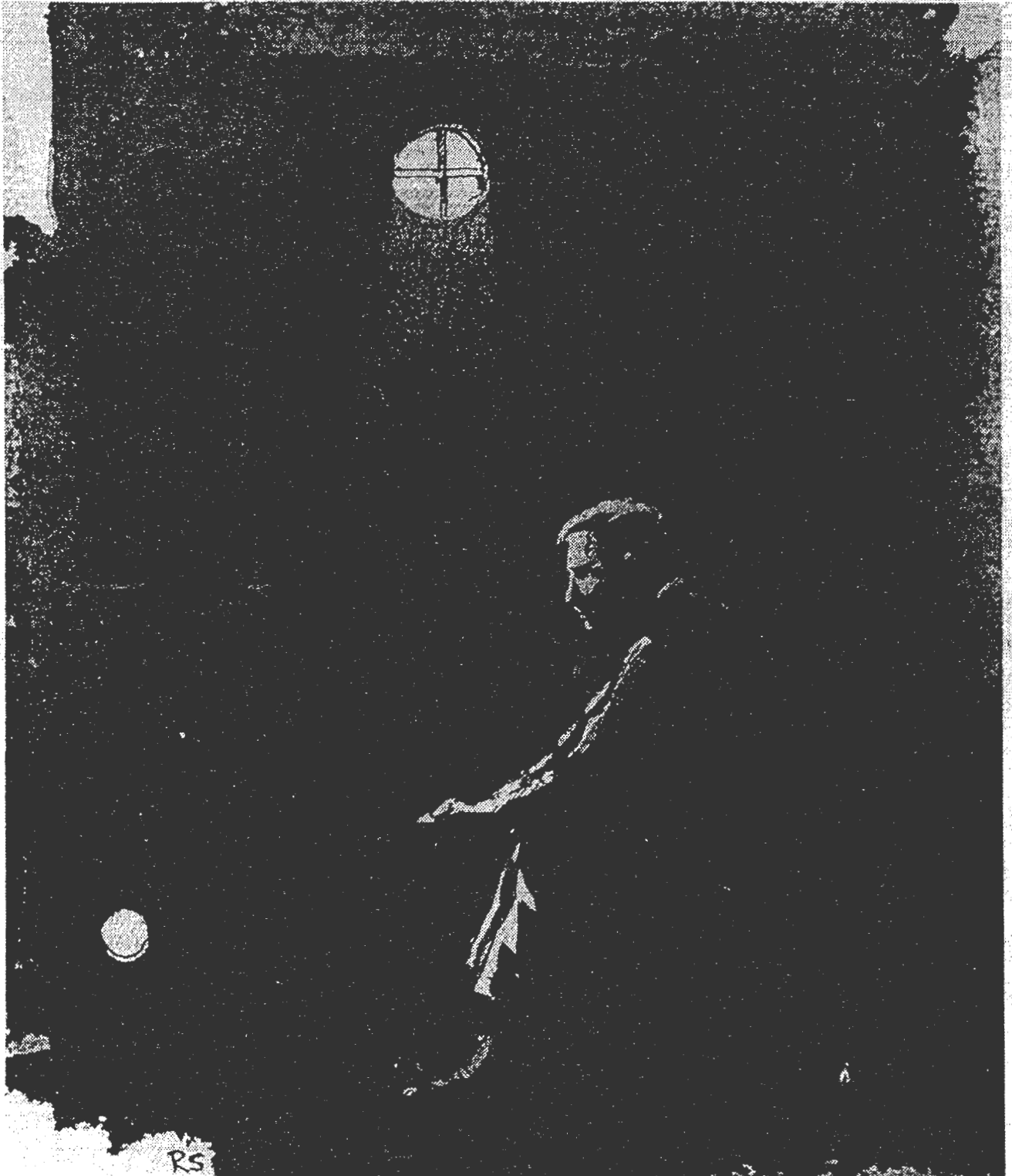
Special Issue

Nutrition Today

The World's Most Widely Read Nutrition Journal

Volume 8
Number 3

May/June 1973
Published Bimonthly



OUR POWS

The Story of Michael Bengé, Betty Ann Olsen and Henry Blood

Henry F. Blood and Betty Olsen, the two missionaries, died in captivity probably because they were not physically strong when they were captured. That Mike Bengé survived suggests that grim determination, which is food for the soul, can make the crucial difference in withstanding disease, malnutrition and deliberate starvation. . . . As told to the Editor.

Michael D. Bengé of Heppner, Oregon, was a 37 year old civilian area development adviser of the Agency for International Development working in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam teaching farmers how to improve their crops when he was captured. He was taken on January 27, 1968 by the North Vietnamese when they overran the Ban Me Thuot area of south central South Vietnam during the Tet offensive. Mike was freed on March 12, 1973, five years and two months later. Betty Olsen, of Nyack, New York, a nurse of the Christian and Missionary Alliance working amongst the lepers in the Ban Me Thuot hospital, and the Reverend Henry F. Blood, a member of the Wycliffe Bible Translators were captured nearby five days later on February 1, 1968. They died in captivity, starved by their captors. Bengé survived by iron-willed determination to live his life "in day-right compartments" until the day of freedom arrived. It is a grim tale of disease, malnutrition, and coercion. . . . "extensive coercion" . . . and fortitude, extensive fortitude, we would add.

It took negotiations with three giant departments of the federal government for me to gain access to the small, private elevator in the Navy's Medical Center at Bethesda leading to the tower where many of the POWs were kept secure from the press in very unhospitable quarters in the first few weeks of freedom. The Departments of Defense, State and Navy appear to have been so surprised, not to say disarmed, that someone wanted to discuss nutri-

tion with one of their precious patients that they granted my request to talk to the POWs before the last man was out of Hanoi. Mike Bengé seemed delighted at the prospect of my visit, however, because he knew the significance of his ordeal to students of nutrition and he was eager to report. It is extraordinary that although he had been seen by many armed forces physicians since his release in Hanoi, I was the first to show any interest in his story of the nutritional aspects of his long captivity. "That's *the* story," he said. "And I'm glad someone is finally interested."

Mike Bengé struck me as a quiet, thoughtful person who usually has himself quite well in hand. He is soft-spoken and explicit in what he has to say. He is reserved yet jovial. When, after we had been talking for ten minutes, I turned and for the first time noticed half finished bottles of Canadian Club and Chivas Regal on the dresser of his hospital room, somehow I was surprised. They didn't seem to fit with him and yet they did. At first, Mike struck me as only serious and cold but then, during our long visit, he received several telephone calls and from the way he spoke to his callers who were usually strangers wishing him well or inquiring about their loved ones, and I knew differently. I learned that he is a man of solicitude and warmth. This gave me a deeper understanding of the story of the past five years of his life that came out. By the time I left Bethesda, I had decided that Mike Bengé is just the sort of man I'd

like to have as a fellow prisoner if I were ever a POW.

Mike is not the picture of the introverted, vegetable sort of personality the psychiatrists said the returning POWs would be. In fact, none of the several prisoners I have seen and talked to even remotely resemble the psychotic wrecks we had been led to anticipate. Mike is, on the other hand, well-integrated in his thinking. He is an engaging and tireless man who has studied and dissected each infinite detail of all that has happened to him. He is not euphoric or rambling when he talks to you but matter of fact, with a clear memory of all he has been through. The psychiatrists who studied him as a returnee and were supposed to read-just him so he could handle the problems of freedom must have been bored stiff by the encounter.

ON A LONELY ROAD

Bengé, once a marine, worked in South Vietnam from 1963 until 1965 as a volunteer for the International Voluntary Services, a church-financed group. Then he joined the Agency for International Development (AID) of the U.S. State Department as an expert in agriculture, teaching Vietnamese farmers how to improve their crops. In the process he became a specialist in the culture of the Montagnard tribes, the rather independent people who live in the hills of central North Vietnam and who have not become assimilated with the other Vietnamese. He is one of the few westerners who learned to speak *Rhade*, their language. He also is fluent in Vietnamese. These talents were to come in handy during his years as a prisoner of war.

Mike was captured as he was driving alone to a neighboring village to warn the missionaries and everyone else

No portion of this article may be reproduced without the express, written consent of the publisher and the author.

Betty Ann Olsen, 33, of the Ivory Coast, West Africa



Henry F. (Hank) Blood, 53, of Portland, Oregon



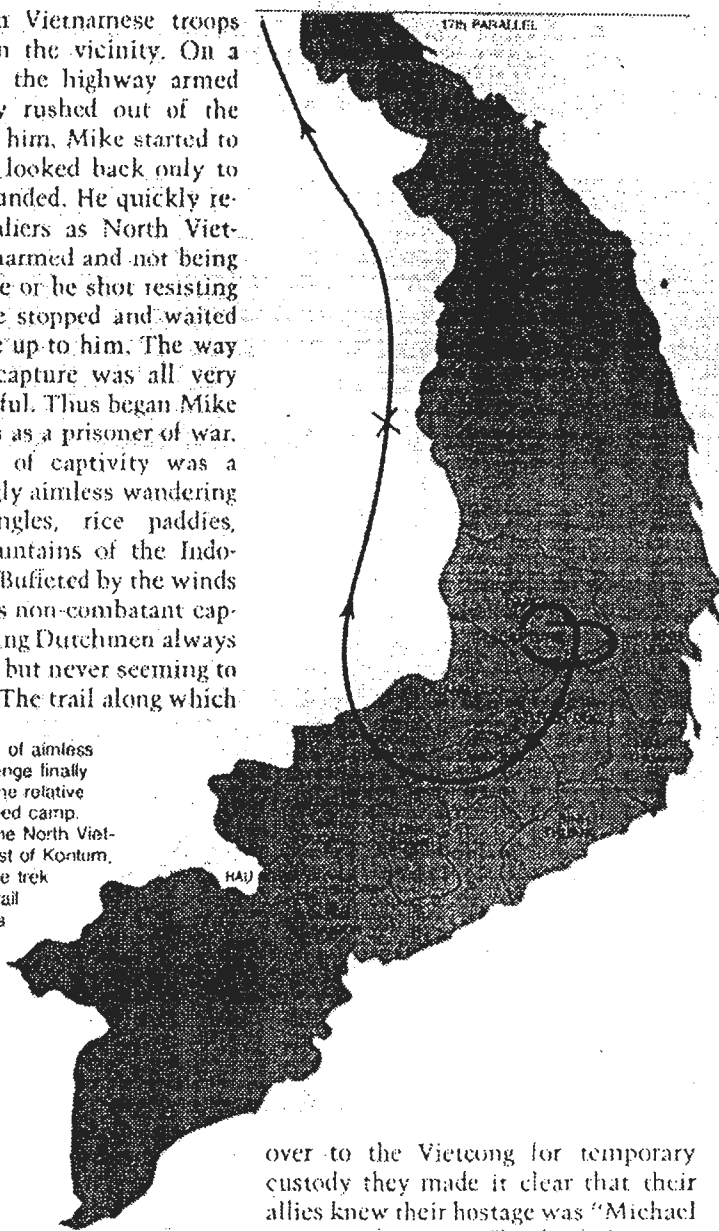
Michael D. Bengé, 37, of Heppner, Oregon



there that North Vietnamese troops had been seen in the vicinity. On a lonely stretch of the highway armed soldiers suddenly rushed out of the woods in front of him. Mike started to turn around and looked back only to see he was surrounded. He quickly recognized the soldiers as North Vietnamese. Being unarmed and not being one to waste time or be shot resisting the inevitable, he stopped and waited for them to come up to him. The way he tells it, the capture was all very orderly and peaceful. Thus began Mike Bengé's five years as a prisoner of war.

The first year of captivity was a period of seemingly aimless wandering through the jungles, rice paddies, swamps and mountains of the Indo-China peninsula. Buffeted by the winds of war, he and his non-combatant captors were like Flying Dutchmen always going somewhere but never seeming to arrive anywhere. The trail along which

Only after nine months of aimless wandering did Mike Bengé finally reach Cambodia and the relative comfort of an established camp. Then, after a year at the North Vietnamese base southwest of Kontum, he began the 1000 mile trek up the Ho Chi Minh Trail to Hanoi and the gates of a formal prison.



his captors took him wound through South Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and finally North Vietnam . . . sometimes retracing their steps, sometimes going in circles. Only finally did it lead him to Hanoi and to the gates of a prison, an unwelcome sight to most people but at least a certain haven for Mike.

The second year Bengé spent as a prisoner in a jungle fortress in Cambodia. The third year he spent alone . . . utterly alone because he was held in absolute solitary confinement and he still doesn't know why. The last two years before his release this past March he was imprisoned with other Americans and treated just as they were.

Mike wants you to keep in mind as you read this story the fact that he was always a prisoner of the North Vietnamese Regular Army. It was they who captured him. When they handed him

over to the Vietcong for temporary custody they made it clear that their allies knew their hostage was "Michael Bengé, important official of the U.S. State Department," and even then the North Vietnamese supervised his custody. This is an important point to remember, Mike says, because the North Vietnamese have tried to cultivate the idea that the only POWs who were mistreated and starved were those held by the Vietcong. That's just not true.

MURDER AT THE MISSION

Five days after Mike was taken, the soldiers brought in two more prisoners. One was a tall, gaunt man and the other was a trim, goodlooking, young woman. She had been a nurse working at a mission hospital, and he was a missionary who was translating the Bible into the local idiom. The two were captured when the North Vietnamese army overran Ban Me Thuot where they were working.

The man was Henry F. (Hank) Blood, fifty-three, of Portland, Oregon. As a missionary of the order of the Wycliffe Bible Translators, a non-denominational protestant organization that spreads the word of Christianity by translating the Holy Scripture into the unusual languages used by tribesmen in remote parts of the world, Hank had been sent to Vietnam to begin the translation of the Bible into the dialect of the local Muong tribal people.

Betty Ann Olsen was 33 when she was led away from the mission hospital by the soldiers. She was the only woman who had not been killed or wounded in the battle that surged around the village. Betty came into the world of the missionary naturally. She was born in a mission on the Ivory Coast of Africa where her parents are still working. When she grew up, she trained to be a nurse at Methodist Hospital in Brooklyn, New York. Doctors and nurses on the medical staff of our military hospital who read this will remember Betty. Prior to going to Ban Me Thuot, Betty worked at a mission in Da Nang. She also freely gave her time and talents to the military hospital there, a gesture that got her the name "The Belle of Da Nang" from the American GIs.

The description of the way Betty and Hank were taken prisoner conjures up a picture of two nights and a day of terror punctuated every few hours by the cold blooded murder of helpless, innocent men and women whose only wish was to do the work of God. Like the obvious and revealing clues that foretell doom in a Greek tragedy, the manner of their capture signalled what lay ahead for Betty Olsen and Hank Blood as they were led away from the carnage.

Ban Me Thuot is a small town 180 miles northeast of Saigon. There were 13 American civilian men, women and children in Ban Me Thuot when the North Vietnamese soldiers arrived. They were all missionaries and a missionary family. There appears to have been little fighting between armed troops yet when it was all over, one missionary had been killed when his house was blown up, two were murdered when the soldiers threw grenades into the shelter where they knew they were, one died later of her injuries, and five, a severely wounded woman and a mother and her 3 children were spared. Only Betty and Hank were taken prisoner.

The first inkling the missionaries had that the war was coming their way was at 3:30 on Tuesday morning, January 30, 1968, the 1st day of the Tet offensive, when the house in which Leon Griswold and his daughter Carolyn were living was suddenly struck by a mortar shell or grenade. The Griswolds were from White Plains, N.Y. Carolyn was a graduate of the Nyack Missionary College, in Nyack, N.Y. She was working with the young people in Ban Me Thuot as a Christian teacher. Her father was not a missionary in the real sense. He was a retired business man who had gone to Vietnam to be with his daughter and to make himself useful by managing the little hospital in Ban Me Thuot. Leon was killed outright when the house was hit, and Carolyn was severely injured.

Not wanting to abandon their patients and thinking the soldiers would not harm them because they were so obviously peace-loving civilians, the missionaries decided not to leave the village in spite of the trouble all around them. But they were wrong. This was a different kind of war.

The North Vietnamese soldiers knew what they were doing. Next day they blew up the house belonging to Ed and Ruth Thompson, also missionaries from Nyack who, luckily, were not in it at the time. They, along with Bob and Marie Ziemer, had taken refuge in a shallow bunker which the men had hastily dug for shelter until the tide of battle passed.

On hearing the blast of the explosion that wrecked the Thompsons' house, Bob Ziemer, an evangelist for the

Christian and Missionary Alliance from Toledo, Ohio, ran out of the bunker with his hands up only to be shot down by a rifleman. Ruth Wilting, a nurse, another Ohioan from Mansfield, was dressing poor Carolyn's wounds in a nearby shed during the commotion and, when she heard the shots that killed Ziemer, she ran out thinking she might be needed and she, too, was murdered. Noting that Bob had come from a shelter, the soldiers then calmly went over and tossed grenades inside, killing both the Thompsons and wounding Marie Ziemer, a fact that, as matters turned out, probably saved her life. She was let go the next morning because, as she said, she was so badly wounded the soldiers must have thought she'd be a nuisance as a captive.

While these tragedies were being played out, the soldiers came upon Betty Olsen and soon discovered Hank Blood and his wife Evangeline in their house nearby. With them were three of their four children, David 6, Catherine 5, and Carolyn 3. Cindy, 7, the oldest child, was in school in Kontum, northeast of Saigon. They quickly decided to make prisoners of Betty and Hank. They didn't bother Evangeline and the children. She says she thinks

they were left alone for, like Marie, they too would have been a burden as captives. Evangeline and the children are now in a remote province in the Philippines carrying on Hank's work.

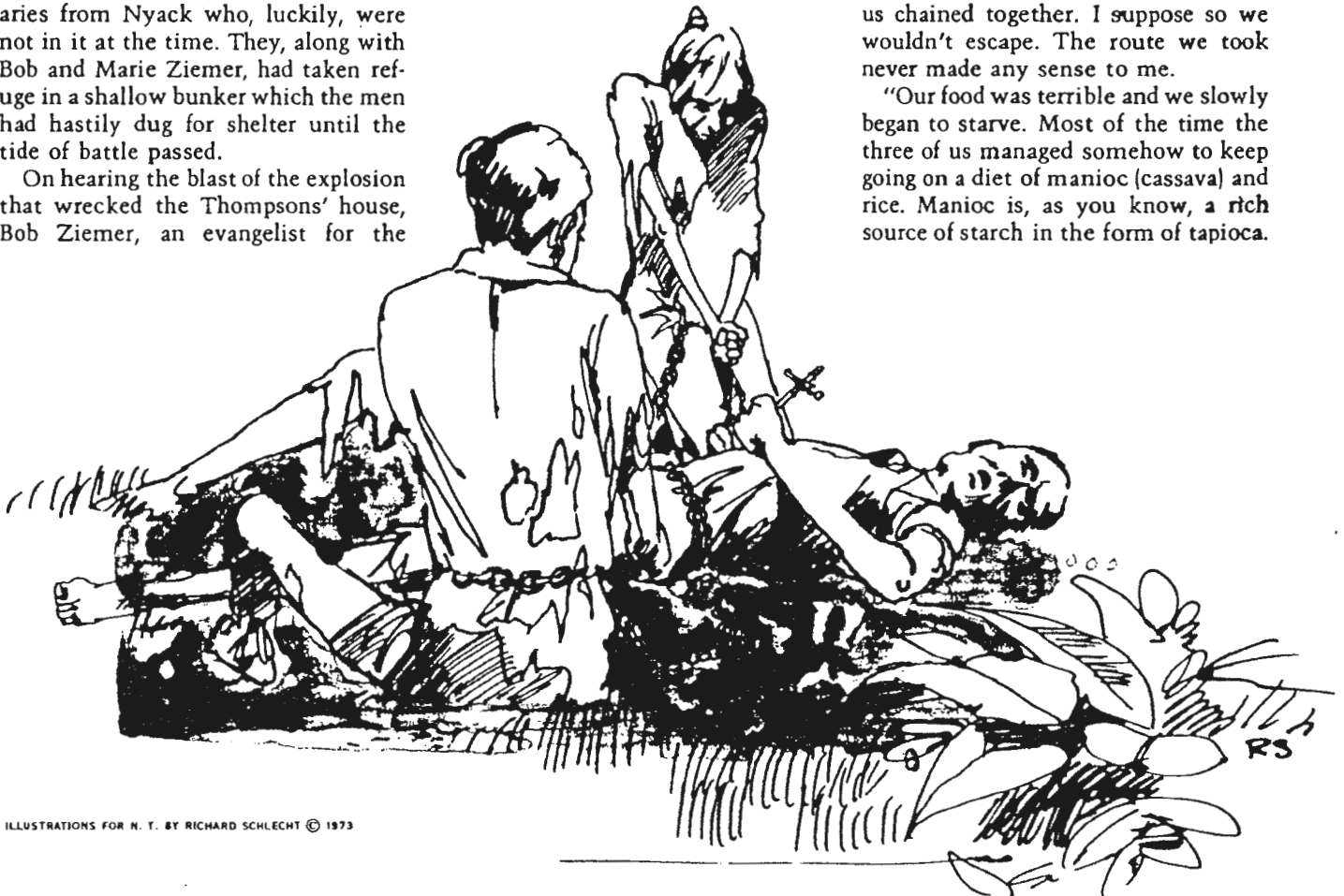
SLOW STARVATION BEGINS

Eventually, as the fighting passed on, Marie Ziemer managed to get away and take Carolyn with her. However, Carolyn Griswold died before she could get to the U.S. Air Force Hospital at Cam Ranh Bay. Marie, fully recovered, is now in New York working at the Missionary headquarters, "As God has willed it," she says ever so softly.

Mike Bengé was turned over to a support group, who rarely engaged in combat, shortly after he was captured. Knowing there was fighting around Ban Me Thuot, he was not surprised, therefore, when Betty and Hank were brought into the camp where he was the sole prisoner. Then their fatal ordeal began.

"The first ten months wandering around South Vietnam were the worst from a nutritional point of view, I suppose," Mike said as he recounted their experience. "We'd be on the trail for several days and then we'd make camp. Sometimes we'd stay in one place for a week or two and then our captors would set out again. The soldiers kept us chained together. I suppose so we wouldn't escape. The route we took never made any sense to me.

"Our food was terrible and we slowly began to starve. Most of the time the three of us managed somehow to keep going on a diet of manioc (cassava) and rice. Manioc is, as you know, a rich source of starch in the form of tapioca.





Once in a while we'd get pieces of meat. Of course, we rarely knew what kind of animal it came from, but it was meat. One time, I know we had sika deer but it wasn't much. After all, the nickname of the little beast is 'mouse deer.'

"We had almost no food at all during the first two months, February and March." Mike continued, "Finally, in the spring we came to a river and stayed there for several weeks. Our diet improved to the extent that we got some fish. We were given a few pieces of carp to eat on three different occasions in those two months."

But if the trio benefitted by reaching the river camp, they paid for it dearly for the area was malarious. Mike's first warning that he had malaria came when he was suddenly seized by a violent chill, profuse sweats and high fever. His two companions told him he was delirious for some time. He has no idea how high his fever climbed but, having seen the virulent malaria from the lowlands of the orient, I can say that Mike would have "run the mercury out the top," as we used to say in Burma. The only notice of his illness his guards took consisted of adding bowls of rice gruel heavily larded with salt and sometimes with sugar to his ration. To make matters worse, Mike, of course, ate even less than usual because of his illness. To him, most disconcerting of all was the suddenness

with which the attacks came on. "I was weak. Oh, was I weak. I might be sitting, chained to a tree or to Betty and Hank and all of a sudden everything would go white. Not black, white. A blinding white. I'd hear a loud rustling noise, like someone was squirting a hose in my ears, and then whoosh! . . . and that'd be it. I'd keel over. I might lie there unconscious for several hours. When I'd wake up I'd be completely exhausted only to have the same experience a short time later. I was blind off and on for thirty-five days."

As time went on the seizures subsided as they sometimes do in acute, malignant tertian malaria, if one survives without treatment. Most patients die in the first few days of this type of malaria which is caused by the *plasmodium falciparum*. This is surely what Mike had. It is the worst there is. "The only thing I recall is the food I had during this time. I don't know how I remember so vividly but twice during this period the three of us were given terrapin, iguana and gibbon which are quite tasty.

"In June we moved on, going southwestward. Hank was visibly ill by this time. Oh, he had malaria and so did Betty, but Hank was sick, really sick. Among other things ugly ulcers began breaking out on his arms. He was the first to notice them. We too itched but neither Betty nor I was as bad off as Hank. I knew he was very sick. The odor from his arms reminded me of

burnt beans. The sores were wet, too. It was then that I became aware of the steady decline in Betty's health. She never complained but she was losing ground. The troops showed her no sympathy and made absolutely no allowances for her as a woman. We three might as well have been dogs which they didn't want to keep and didn't dare lose."

THE WORST ENEMY ATTACKS

To add to the misery, if that were possible, the three became infested with lice. The deliberate refusal of their captors to permit the pitiful, harmless prisoners to rid themselves of their lice is still another example of bestiality.

Listening to this stalwart American—my lifeboat companion if ever I have a choice—tell how he and Betty and Hank became infested with lice, one suddenly glimpses another example of the desperate conditions to which they had sunk, or, more accurately said, been pushed. In reality, the trio accepted the lice as the lesser of two evils, the other being the penetrating cold of the damp jungle at night.

Let Mike tell it. "From time to time, the troops we were with would bring in native prisoners. One day in June 1968 they brought in a group of Montagnards, the proud tribesmen of the hills whom the communists hate. Having worked among them, I liked them, and I suppose they think I'm



okay. I speak their language, too, and that helps. Anyway, one night I was sleeping next to a Montagnard. It was very, very cold and I began to shiver. The tribesman heard me and invited me to share his blanket but not before warning me that he was infested with lice. I didn't care. 'I'll share your blanket and your lice. I'd rather have lice than be cold!' The following day the Montagnard gave Bengé the blanket which he in turn shared with his companions. They repeatedly asked their guards to let them boil the blankets and their clothes, but the guards refused. Thus, to heap misery upon misery, Betty, Mike and Hank were soon home for a horde of lice. Apparently the parasites didn't carry typhus for, other than the incessant itching and the sores, they seemed little worse for their experience.

By this time, the Americans had weeping ulcers over all exposed parts of their bodies. They had also become emaciated and seriously ill in various and ill-defined ways.

FIRST REVEREND BLOOD †, NURSE OLSEN †

On one occasion, their suffering was greatly relieved when a guard gave them leaves of hot peppers and some beans and eggplant. Later they got a small round fruit which was too hard to eat raw but which became "quite chewy once we softened it up over a fire. I haven't any idea what it was. It had a bitter taste and offered diversion.

"Hank's health seemed to fail at a faster pace than Betty's and my own. He had courage and will. He was a man of strong character that one could be proud of but his health was against him. I felt all along that he might not survive the starvation and hardship. I kept thinking, and I kept it to myself, 'one severe blow, one serious illness and we'll lose Hank.' That blow struck in July when Hank developed a severe chest condition. Betty, a nurse, diagnosed it as pneumonia. The three of us knew it probably meant the end for him. And it was. The Vietnamese could plainly see how sick Hank was and even though they could have got a doctor or a paramedic with drugs if they'd called for help, they didn't lift a finger to save Hank Blood."

The Reverend Henry F. Blood, who devoted his life to the Christian mission of sacrifice for others, today lies buried in a shallow grave along a jungle trail in southwestern Vietnam.

The starvation ration for Betty and

Mike remained unchanged. In August, they were given some corn which they cooked and a melon-like fruit that tasted like cucumber. As they walked along with the troops, they sometimes found pieces of buffalo hide which they chewed endlessly just as Magellan's sailors ate portions of the rigging when they starved as their ship lay becalmed in the middle of the Pacific. Once in awhile the pitiful prisoners would grab bamboo shoots as they trudged along the trail. "The bamboo must have something in it. We felt better each time we ate it. It must be quite nourishing."

As August dragged on toward September and they moved through dense jungle drenched by the monsoon rains, leeches, "armies of leeches appeared in our path. At times the whole surface ahead of us and the foliage on both sides would be blanketed with the shiny black creatures. They were huge, too. There was no way to avoid them. Of course, we trampled hundreds but I think hundreds more got on Betty and me. Like pneumonia for Hank, for Betty, the repulsive bloodsucking leeches were the last straw."

I can attest that in the jungle man's worst enemy is not snakes, tigers, elephants or any other such predator. These creatures are as fearful of man as he is of them. Given half a chance, each will give the other a wide berth. The implacable enemy is the leech. To them, man with his thin skin offers an inexhaustible banquet of salubrious, warm blood. Against them man is helpless . . . as were Betty and Mike. The leeches got into their clothes. Got all over them. Mike still carries dime-sized blue-black scars from the leeches on his body that fascinated the doctors at Bethesda.

Although she had not menstruated in the eight months since being captured, it was obvious to Mike that Betty was becoming acutely anemic. "She was white as a sheet," he says. She also suffered dysentery constantly which made the vitamin deficiencies she surely had worse. Like Mike's, her hair had turned white and began coming out in handfuls. She was weak, had severe pains and cramps in her legs, which were edematous. "Yet," Mike says, "that was one wonderful, brave girl. She didn't complain once. Not a whimper. Our guards could see that she was dying. I pled with them saying she would die if she didn't get some food, drugs and a doctor, but they paid

no attention."

Thus did Betty Ann Olsen, The Belle of Da Nang, vivacious, selfless, a pretty, young woman, die in September 1968. She was one who, as Mike Bengé describes those months, seems to have had about her all the saintly qualities of beauty, courage, selflessness and inner peace.

SCURVY, ETC.

"Each of us certainly had scurvy during that time. Fortunately for me," Mike continued, "I knew enough about nutrition to recognize the symptoms of some of our diseases. I used the word 'fortunately' because I got some satisfaction out of trying to recognize the symptoms of malnutrition. I had studied general agriculture and agricultural engineering when I was a student at Oregon State in Corvallis. As I'm sure you know, they emphasize nutrition there so I had several courses in animal and human nutrition. Having some understanding of what was happening helped me get through those days.

"But let me tell you more about scurvy. Before he died, Hank commented several times that his teeth felt loose. Later on, Betty and I experienced the same sensation. Our bodies were covered with what we called 'serous sores' that itched terribly. Then one day Betty noticed that her gums were bleeding and mine were too. Everytime we bit down on anything, we were sure we were going to knock out a tooth. Once, for no apparent reason, a guard gave us a tube of toothpaste and we rubbed it on our gums. It left a refreshing taste I'll never forget, but it didn't stop the bleeding.

"There is another fact of nutritional significance I noticed that summer which I should tell you about. It is that Hank and I had an insatiable thirst all the time. We couldn't get enough water. At the same time, I couldn't get enough salt. Whenever I could get it, I'd eat it despite the fact I would urinate copiously ten or more times a day.

"Shortly after Betty died, the pains along my shinbones became worse and my legs swelled up more than ever. My food ration did not double or triple when my friends died. If anything, the food was worse. We had all noticed that in walking on the trail we'd have difficulty lifting our legs. To step over a log, for instance, I'd have to lean down and with my two hands lift each of my legs over one at a time. The situation got so bad that when we stopped to rest, we'd always sit next

to a small tree because, unless we had a tree to put our arms around and pull ourselves up, we'd be forced to crawl.

"Strangely enough," he continued, "although I guess I was as sick as could be, I felt comparatively strong in the upper part of my body. In fact, I carried my back pack containing what few things I owned: food, rudimentary utensils and my lice and their blanket without difficulty.

"By this time my hair or what was left of it had turned grey and as I looked around at the rest of me I estimated that I weighed about a hundred pounds. I was not disoriented. I had no feelings of being another person. I had no bad dreams. I was coherent and I was bound and determined I was going to survive. The death of those two wonderful people, Betty and Hank, created in me an iron will to live. I kept telling myself that all I had to do on any day was to live until the next. I lived each day in a 'day-tight compartment;' as the saying goes. Each morning I'd look at the sunrise and see it as a signal of success. 'One more day,' I'd say. 'I've beat 'em one more day!' Why it made me positively happy. I did not fret. I did not think about anything that would cloud my determination to see that sun come up the next day. I made up my mind and somehow stuck to it. I guess that's why I am here talking to you now.

"After Betty died we continued our trek. For all I could see and learn it had seemed like aimless wandering but then I know this was not so. After all, I was the captive of a trained unit of soldiers who were under the direct control of the North Vietnamese Army. I want to make that clear to everyone who reads this story. I wasn't held by some rag-tag bunch of bandits. I was held by the Regular Army of the North Vietnamese Government. That's the message.

"By October we reached Cambodia and turned northward. In a few days we came into a large military camp that was obviously very important. It meant that things were surely going to look up for me. I was certain it meant some change in my fate and any change, no matter what, could only be for the better.

"My first reaction upon entering this large, well-organized military base was one of sadness that Betty and Hank could not have lived until that day. It had been ten months since our capture, ten months on the trail, and if they

could only have held on 'til October they might be with us today.

"Shortly after my arrival I was seen by a physician for the first time in ten months. He seemed to be competent. He immediately diagnosed my condition as advanced beriberi and severe scurvy. He gave me the works. I got repeated intravenous injections of the B vitamins and vitamin C. Then, not being content with that, they began giving me vitamins subcutaneously at the same time. Also, I was so emaciated they attempted to feed me with continuous injections of glucose but for some reason it would not work so I just drank the solutions."

Benge was held in the North Vietnam army compound for a year. His diet improved greatly. However, while he was no longer in danger of starving to death, he was still undernourished and forced to live on what we'd regard as little better than scraps. Yet sometimes the guards gave him milk and peanut soup and a green consomme. Occasionally he got more rice and bamboo shoots. The medical care didn't follow any pattern either. "Sometimes a doctor would pay attention to me, then for weeks I wouldn't see him. If they felt like it," as Mike puts it, "they'd give me some chloroquin and quinine for my malaria. Then they'd forget me. I never knew what system I was a victim of. But anyway, I can tell you that after three months I began to feel myself again. While the care I got, when I got it, was reasonably good and the circumstances of my imprisonment improved, now that I was the captive in a well-established Army base, the periodic kindnesses, if you can call them that, and the moments of brutality, which you *can* call them, were less haphazard and better organized.

"Really, as I look back on it, it seems strange that I haven't much to tell you about that year—that is much about

me, my general health and my nutritional health. That's all we're supposed to talk about (Ed. *This interview was granted on the condition that the subjects discussed be restricted to nutrition and medical care.*). The days ran together. I was reasonably well taken care of and suppose I have no great reason for complaint. After all, I was seeing the sun come up every day and that meant I was winning."

LECTURES ON THE HO CHI MINH

When the year ended and November 1969 came, Mike Benge found himself once more on the trail . . . the Hô Chi Minh Trail. He has no idea who decided to move him or why. In fact, during five years of captivity, even when they gave him the worst punishment of all a few months hence, he was not told where he was going, why he was being moved, or why he was being treated as he was. He only knew that now he was headed northward with what appeared to be army units who were returning home to North Vietnam. Although this was long before the allied "invasion" into Cambodia, Mike wants me to stress the point that he saw an unending line of North Vietnamese troops moving southward on this main supply route. For weeks at a time, he says, the stream of men and material was unending. (This mammoth influx, discounted by many in the U.S.A., was the major reason for the move into Cambodia.)

In describing his trek to Hanoi, Mike commented especially about our concern over the use of drugs by American soldiers. "You think we have a problem with our GIs?" he said. "You should see what I saw as I walked to North Vietnam! All the truck drivers along the trail and troops at missile sites I passed were high on marijuana or opium."

The entire journey was on foot. Although he was in pretty good condition when he left the base camp, he soon recognized the symptoms of beriberi and scurvy with which he had become so familiar. His diet returned to dependence upon a catch-as-catch-can routine with rice and cassava and bits of meat now and then. During these (and other) months it cannot be said that Benge was partially starved because his captors were starved. They weren't. They received food supplies regularly and enjoyed a diet that was adequate and varied by their standards. He attributes their neglect of him to the fact that he was "a prize of war





... a prize of victory . . . an individual who was the enemy and, therefore, to be despised." The soldiers taking him north appeared to believe that their only obligation was to keep him alive until they got him to Hanoi—and nothing more. And they did nothing more. Sometimes when they would stop, Mike would be displayed by his guards to fresh troops going southward on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and mocked as "an example of Americans who are so used to riding in airplanes and soft living that they cannot walk." Bengé said that on such occasions, and it happened all the time, "I'd counter-propagandize in Vietnamese by telling them that I was suffering from deliberate maltreatment. I don't think I sold anybody but they sure were surprised when I sounded off in Vietnamese. That made me feel real good."

As he trudged on, the beriberi and scurvy symptoms returned. Once again his gums began to bleed, his legs cramped and ached and he could barely keep up. Skin ulcers reappeared and, worst of all, he had something new to worry about. His shoes had rotted and the skin began to peel off the soles of his feet.

PRISON AT LAST

Finally, after more than two years in captivity in the open, Michael Bengé arrived at a formal prison on the out-

skirts of Hanoi. He now finds it hard to say what he expected to be his lot in Hanoi. His life was so filled with a determination to live it in day-tight compartments that he spent little time worrying about what lay ahead. Yet one thing occurred that he was completely unprepared for. Shortly after he entered the prison he was taken to a cell and pushed in. The room, when he measured it, turned out to be nine feet square, eight feet high and with two round holes in the wall. One with crossed bars in it was near the ceiling and thankfully it let in a small ray of sunlight. Another was in the floor and through it came the rats, Mike's only companions. He didn't see another soul but the guard and he did not talk. The door closed and did not open to let him out until the winter of 1971 . . . only a few weeks short of a year.

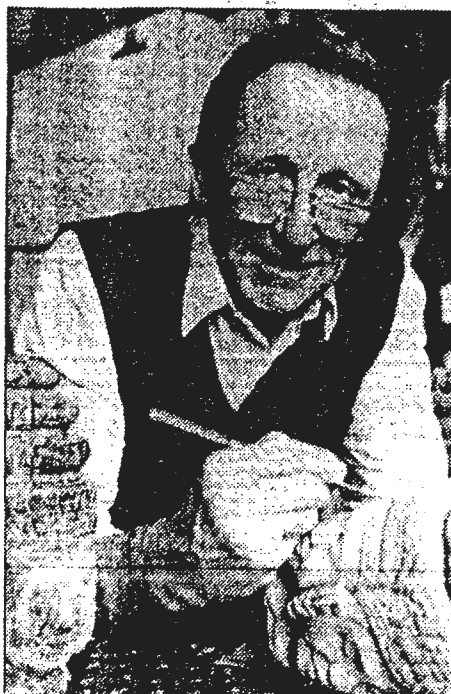
"I don't know why I was placed in solitary confinement. There was no altercation, never a word of explanation. I suppose it was punishment—not punishment for me individually—but punishment for being an American. Anyway, I tried not to think of it. After all, so long as I could tell when that sun came up each day, I had it made."

There is a seeming contradiction in this fiendish treatment and it was in the food they gave him. The meals he got in solitary, "flying solo" as the

POWs called it, were the best Mike had during his entire captivity. That is, it was the best until the Communists began to fatten up all the prisoners of war for the U.S. propaganda market. Instead of the bitterly deficient diet he endured during the two years or so on the trail, each day while he was in solitary he was given a small loaf of white or brown French bread twice daily, accompanied by soup made of cabbage, greens or pumpkin. With relative frequency he got potatoes and sometimes even a few scraps of meat of unknown origin.

He was still very sick. He noticed that he urinated as frequently as fourteen times a day. His legs swelled up frequently and he was nearly blind. He had diarrhea but that was nothing new. After eight months in prison his "symptoms of beriberi" became so severe that they had to send a doctor to see him. Finally, in November 1971, he was taken out of solitary confinement and placed with two other American prisoners. For him that was the next best thing to complete freedom.

Then the sun began to rise each morning without waiting for Mike to take notice. And it continued to do so for two more short years, until March 1973 when the prison gates finally opened and Michael D. Bengé came home.



Michael Bengé

*Agriculturalist
Agency for International Development
Central Highlands, 1962-1968
Prisoner of War, 1968-1973*

Mike Bengé was born in 1935 and grew up on a ranch in Oregon. He dropped out of Oregon State University to join the Marines in 1955. During his hitch, Bengé served in Japan and developed a fascination for the Orient. He returned to university and completed a degree in agricultural engineering. In 1961 he took a job with the International Voluntary Services and was sent to Vietnam where, in 1965, he was hired by AID and by 1968 was its second highest ranking official in Darlac Province. He was fluent in both Vietnamese and Rhade, a montagnard dialect. Today Bengé is in Washington, D.C., still an AID official. He is married and has a daughter.

At the end of January 1968 a bunch of us had gathered at my house in Ban Me Thuot to celebrate Tet. Sometime after 1:00 A.M. on Tuesday the thirtieth, I went out on the balcony of my house to toast the New Year with Dr. Gerald Hickey, the anthropologist. We had received warnings of a big Communist attack scheduled for Tet, but I thought it was part of the Communist disinformation program since we got the same warning every year. During Tet there are more rounds fired off at the moon, something about a troll trying to eat it, than during the entire preceding year. And with firecrackers going off all over town it was an ideal time for the NVA to infiltrate because, hell, they could have the whole town captured before anybody knew it wasn't part of the Tet celebration. The popping, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, that began going off we thought was just more firecrackers. Gerry and I toasted each other and I said, "Well they missed another good chance to take over." Just as the words were out of my mouth an 82MM mortar round landed in my front yard and Gerry said, "Oh shit, it's real."

I had montagnard guards at my house, so I quickly set them up in a defense perimeter. Then I got all my non-combatants, those who had never been in a firefight or didn't know which end of a gun the bullets came out of, under a central stairwell which was surrounded by heavy walls. We got a smattering of firing off and on, so I kept everybody inside and was up most of the night walking the perimeter. The other Americans in Ban Me Thuot were scattered out in a number of compounds around the town. There were CIA, military intelligence, police advisers, an air force R & R billet, army helicopter units, plus all sorts of civilians with various organizations, including a group of missionaries out on the edge of town.

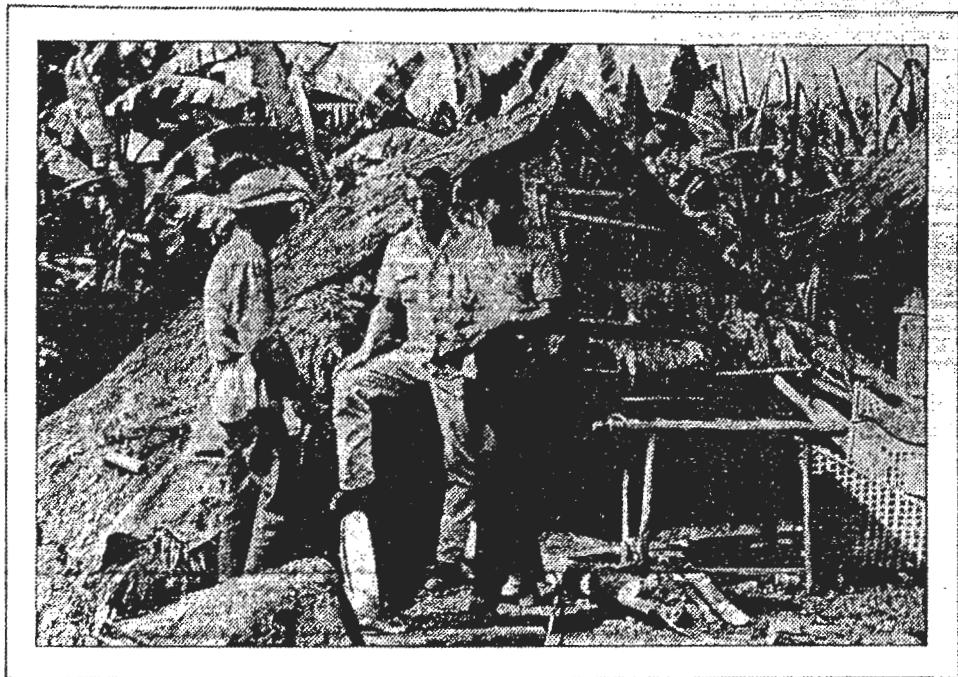
On the first morning of the attack, however, the Communists left the missionaries alone while they struck at the nearby province headquarters and blew up an ammunition dump. Our telephone to the province headquarters started working again after first light, so I called to find out what had happened to the American civilians. Unfortunately nobody there knew, nor could I find the American army officer responsible for the evacuation of U.S. noncombatants. Since no one else was looking out for the civilians, I decided

I'd better round them up. I strapped on a shoulder holster with a .38 revolver and drove off.

I picked up one of our doctors and dropped him off to tend the wounded at the province hospital and went from there to the local orphanage and girls school to see if anyone had been wounded. Then I set out to get the two Americans farthest out: a refugee adviser and a logistics adviser who I ordered to pack up and get their asses out. On the way back I stopped at the province headquarters and talked to the province chief. He was worried about his family, which was in a house near the missionary compound. Since I had to check on two IVS kids down in one of the villages, I told him I would look in on his wife and ten children. I found them scared but okay, radioed the information back, and headed down the hill toward the village. I was just about there when I saw a bunch of guys crossing the road in light sage khaki uniforms, a different color than ARVN, and wearing different kinds of hats. I said, "Oh shit, they don't look like they're ours." So I backed up the hill and drove into the missionary compound.

The missionaries knew NVA and VC groups were all around, but at this point they had not been attacked. When they saw me coming they started waving at me to get out. I stopped and started to turn around when thirteen NVA regulars raised up out of the ditches at the sides of the road and pointed their SKs and AKs and B40 rocket launcher at me. I felt like I was in a horrendous dream where people just suddenly appear. I had five rounds in the pistol under my arm, but I divided five into thirteen and decided, it just doesn't work, baby, there's no way out of this.

The leader of the group looked like a Vietnamese Hitler with his hair hanging down in his eyes and a little mustache. Later I found out he was head of a psychological warfare team, which was lucky for me because the propaganda types followed the official line that prisoners were to be taken alive and given humane treatment. The regular Communist troops made it more of an operational procedure to kill prisoners than to take them. They took away my gun and marched me to their headquarters, which was located in a nearby graveyard. One of their officers interrogated me a little,



but I told him I didn't know anything, I was just an agricultural adviser. However, a couple of things made them suspicious of my story. I was wearing a cadre hat, a green beret with a silver tiger pin on it, and black jammies. I also kept my old Marine Corps dog tags on my key chain. I looked military to them and that may have been another reason why I didn't get killed, because military prisoners had political value while civilian prisoners were seen strictly as encumbrances.

They marched me away from the battlefield several kilometers to the Ban Me Thuot leprosarium. Upon arrival I encountered a surreal scene. They had captured about two dozen young montagnard troops, some as young as fourteen years, and had them lined up before a group of lepers the Communists had organized into a kangaroo court. The VC cadres were acting as prompters for this jury. The prompters would first offer the accusations, such as crimes against the people for serving in the army, and then suggest the punishment, in this case execution. Under this psychological pressure the lepers, many of them mentally unstable to begin with, began chanting, "Kill them, kill them." Saying it was the will of the people, the NVA then shot every one of the montagnards, just blew them away. It was very, very, very macabre, like something out of an insane movie.

I guess they let me see this to prove they were serious, because my question-

Flanked by a montagnard villager and a member of a student medical assistance team, Mike Benge surveys damage after a catastrophic flood in Phu Bon Province, September 1964. Benge served as an interpreter during relief efforts.

Children stand by a well drilled by Benge and a montagnard team for the International Voluntary Services at Dr. Pat Smith's montagnard hospital, Kontum, March 1964.



ing was taken over by an NVA intelligence officer and became more intense. He wanted to know where the province chief was, where the ARVN division commander was, the names of the American advisers and their addresses, and a great deal more information. When I reported that I was an American civilian and just an agricultural adviser, the officer very deliberately took out a 9MM Russian or Chinese automatic pistol and put it up to my head and asked me again. I told him I didn't know anything. Then he cleverly let me see a shell go into the chamber of the gun, put it back to my head, and asked me again. I said I knew nothing. He cocked it, the sound was as loud as a bomb going off, and put the pistol against my temple again. I decided I had to talk. If their intelligence was as good as what we claimed, they knew everything anyway. Luckily they had recently rotated most of the Americans and had new advisers in. So I began giving him the names of everybody who left. I learned something that helped me over and over: it didn't matter what you told them, just give any answer to relieve the pressure of the moment. After my interrogation they got me on the march again, and we circled around to a mountain camp overlooking Ban Me Thuot. There they had built two bamboo cages and chained me in one of them.

When the NVA had hit the city, they came up the road past the compound where the thirteen Americans from The Christian and Missionary Alliance group lived. Two days later the Communists occupied the compound and dynamited the missionaries' houses. The survivors hid in a garbage pit and watched while the NVA occupied the church and used it as their headquarters. The missionaries bargained with the North Vietnamese to evacuate a severely injured woman, but when they emerged from the shelter, three were gunned down [including Ed and Ruth Thompson—see page 152], and three others were killed by grenades thrown into the bunker. Two who remained unwounded were led away.

A couple of days later they brought the pair—Hank Blood, who had been translating the Bible into Mnang, a montagnard dialect, and Betty Olsen, a nurse who specialized in treating lepers—into camp and chained us together. There were also a number of RF/PF troops and

a few South Vietnamese officers imprisoned there who were constantly being pressured to write statements and make radio broadcasts. As an object lesson, the VC who were now in charge of our captivity periodically took out those who wouldn't cooperate and killed them. One ARVN captain came to me and said, "How will my wife and kids survive if I don't cooperate with them?" And I said, "You're right. What can you do? I don't condemn you for that." They also recaptured a couple of young soldiers who had escaped and held another summary trial and firing squad as an example. The VC ran the prison camp, but it was evident that the NVA were in charge for there was a continuous flow of NVA officers coming through checking on us and questioning us. They had Hank identified as a CIA operative and were still somewhat confused about my status. We were there for about a month.

We discovered that the Communists were so bureaucratic that once Americans were in the system our guards would get in trouble if we were killed. The only way they could justify your death was if you hotly defied them or if you tried to escape, except later it became obvious the Communists could just ignore you until you died of neglect. They knew that we were of no value to them as political prisoners, and they began telling us so. We just ate rice that should be given to the troops. As a result we received almost no food during February and March, our first two months in captivity. We managed to keep going on a diet of manioc, but we were slowly starving to death.

I was in good shape when captured, thirty-two years old, 155 pounds of muscle, and used to living off the local market. I had, in my years in South Vietnam, generally eaten with the montagnards so if they killed a pig for sacrifice, I ate the raw pork. I also ate grasshoppers, rats, lizards, and locusts just as they did, and we used ants scalded in hot water as a dressing on greens. It was like putting vinegar on your salad. I had been raised on a ranch, too, and was used to scavenging wild berries and roots and whatever else I could find. I was probably as good a candidate as a survivalist as anyone around. But the missionaries weren't. They didn't exercise much and looked pale and drawn even before they were captured. Their diets didn't consist

of much; they ate hardly any locally grown food or produce because they were afraid of catching diseases and relied instead on a lot of canned goods.

During the first months of captivity I had been talking to a provincial montagnard who had been conscripted by the VC and was one of our guards. I had been working on him, saying he would be awarded with \$10,000 and a piece of land if he would take off with me. But when it looked like he was about convinced, I had a moral problem about leaving Betty and Hank, because I was sure they would die on their own. While I was deciding what to do they started moving us again, first to the southwest and then they hooked back due east and stopped in the Chu Rulach area, a long-time VC stronghold called Happy Valley. The camp was near a stream that produced clouds of mosquitoes and we stayed there for several weeks, caged most of the time. The main job being done there was the indoctrination and reeducation of montagnards who were forced to farm for the NVA and VC, so after awhile the VC became a little more lax with us and let us out sometimes. The food was still mainly manioc, and we were given small amounts of salt and tobacco. I traded most of the salt and tobacco to the montagnards for whatever greens they could get us, although I started smoking some because it killed the hunger pains. By this time, in addition to the first stages of malnutrition, we were suffering from a parasitic skin disease and dengue fever, but for me the worst was to come.

After all that worrying about how the missionaries would survive, I came down with cerebral malaria, at that time in Vietnam about 80 percent fatal. I became feverish, had diarrhea, loss of appetite, and then loss of vision. I would "white out." I'd get a rushing sound in my ears, everything would just turn white, and I might wake up three days or a week later completely exhausted. For somewhere around a month I was delirious most of the time and blind. The only thing that kept me alive was the nurse, Betty Olsen. Whenever the guards would let her, she washed my face, cleaned me up as best she could, forced me to drink, and spoon-fed me. She would rouse me enough to where I could kind of dreamlike realize what she was trying to do, and then I'd just blank out again. When I began com-

ing around after about five weeks, we were living in a cave underneath a cliff in another part of Darlac Province. I had walked there, but I can't remember much of it except stumbling along supporting myself with a bamboo staff. I had lost 30 pounds, probably down to under 120, and was as weak as a kitten.

In July they moved us again. The monsoons had started, and it was as wet and slippery as hell. By now they weren't much worried about us running off because we were all three pretty much a mess. Their attitude was one of benign neglect. They wouldn't kill us, but if we died of natural causes it was good because we had no practical value and bureaucratically they could get away with it. At the new camp they gave us a couple of sheets of plastic to keep the rain off, but there was no way that all three of us could keep dry at the same time. Hank was particularly run-down both mentally and physically. With the constant soaking he soon developed severe chest pains, and we knew he had pneumonia. The Communists had raided the provincial medical warehouse in Ban Me Thuot during the Tet attack, so we knew they had supplies at the nearby field hospital. Betty and I begged them to give medicine to Hank, but they refused. It took him a little more than three days to die—sometime in mid-July. We buried him in a shallow grave in Darlac Province and moved on. Now we had been prisoners for six months.

Soon after we were put in the charge of some harder-core VC. They took me around to show to the troops and would say, "Here's one of the invincible Americans. He's so used to riding in limousines and airplanes he can no longer walk." A couple of times I turned around and in Vietnamese said, "These guys are lying like hell. I only get half a bowl of rice a day to eat, I've had goddamn malaria with no medicine, and I doubt if you could do any better." Then they'd jerk the rope and hustle me away. I don't think I was very good propaganda material.

By this time I was also covered with ulcers from infected leech bites. We had marched through an area where the ground was just covered with leeches, and they dropped from the trees down your neck and crawled into your genital regions. They were huge and there was no way to avoid them. Hundreds of them got on Betty and me. I was bleeding all



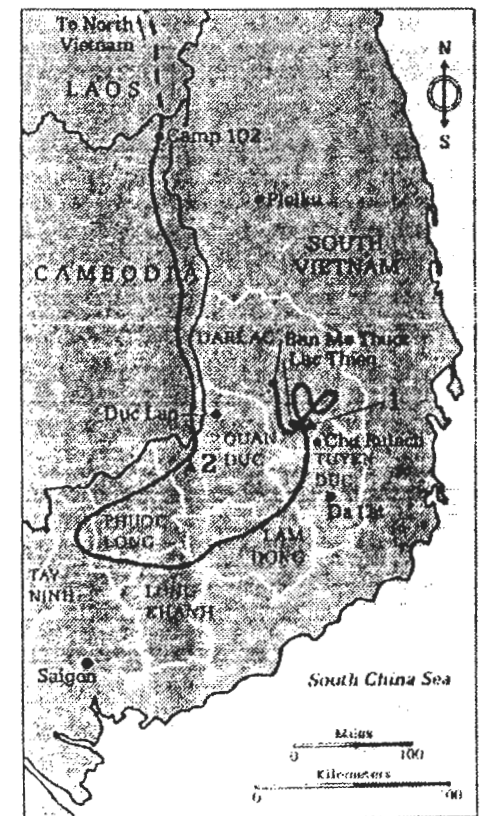
over and even now, nearly twenty years later, I've got scars all over my body from those bites.

For Betty, the leeches were just about the last straw, she was getting pretty damn weak, and in addition to the leeches we had lice all over us. The VC wouldn't let us boil our clothes and blankets to kill the vermin. To annoy us they just let the lice eat away. By October we had walked from Darlac Province to Tay Ninh, then hooked back north. As we crossed Quang Duc Province and then circled toward the Cambodian border, they began taking Betty on a different trail than me during the day. I learned when they brought us together again at night that they often dragged her along or kicked her when she dropped from exhaustion. When I started to protest she tried to stop me saying they would kill me if I complained. I replied, "Look, we're dying anyway, what the hell's the difference?" So I argued with the guards and declared that Betty was just not able to go on. For once they listened, and after a couple more days they let Betty and me rest at a camp near a river where they had a couple of regiments stationed.

I was down to about 100 pounds, and I guess one thing that helped me survive this period was acting as moral support for her, because it kept my mind off how bad I was. I told a doctor from a medical unit there that unless Betty got some half-way decent food she wasn't going to be able to make it any farther. So after a

At a celebration in his honor, Benge drinks ceremonial wine with montagnard villagers in Buon Kô Sir, Darlac Province, 1966.

Captive journey. This map depicts Benge's route while a prisoner. It shows the sites of (1) Hank Blood's and (2) Betty Olsen's deaths.



good deal more cajoling, the guards finally said they would give us a good meal. Betty and I dug up some young bamboo sprouts, and they gave us some mung beans and rice and corn and boiled the bamboo for us. We were so ravenously hungry that we began wolfing it down. It registered in my mind that the bamboo shoots were extremely bitter, but we just kept eating.

Jesus Christ, right after we got through we were struck by extreme stomach cramps and then projectile diarrhea and vomiting. I could bend over and hit a tree. I later concluded they had decided to kill us, because with bamboo you have to boil it twice and each time pour off the fluid to lower its high acid content. They had only boiled it once, or it was poisonous. This way they could say we died of natural causes. All Betty and I could do was go back to our area and move our hammocks to a place nearer to a little ravine. Betty had it so badly it just tore her to pieces. She became so weak she couldn't get out of her hammock. The guards did nothing but let her lay there in her own defecation. They wouldn't let me take her down or wash her or bring her water. They did loan me a knife so I could cut a hole in the bottom of her hammock and let the defecation drain out. It was the best I could do. She just completely dehydrated and died within three days in late September. This was the low point, psychologically my worst time.

But I soon made up my mind; fuck you people, I'm going to live in spite of it all. Being a bit stronger than Betty I survived the diarrhea and they moved me again, this time into Cambodia because, I later found out, there were now orders to take all prisoners to North Vietnam. Fortunately it was the hatching season for some little green frogs, and they were everywhere. Whenever I could I'd reach down and pop one into my mouth whole and swallow it before the guards saw me. If they did, I would be kicked or get a rifle butt on the head. Also, I discovered something similar to a pistachio nut, and once again if the guards were in a good mood I would gather them as we walked along the trail and throw them in the coals of the fire to roast at nighttime.

I had another trick. I occasionally convinced the guards to let me take baths when we crossed a stream because I remembered reading a book about the fa-

mous frontiersman Hugh Glass, who had to crawl 200 miles for help after being maulled by a bear. One thing that kept him alive was allowing maggots to breed in his wounds to eat the decaying flesh. Then he would lay down in the rivers he passed, and the fish would eat out the maggots and the rest of the dead tissue. I layed down whenever they would let me bathe, and sure enough the fish would nibble away at my ulcers. Once in a while I was fast enough to catch one of the fish and would immediately eat it raw.

I knew the minute we crossed into Cambodia in October because in Vietnam we were constantly hiding from the airplanes and helicopters, but as soon as we got over the border, the Communists walked out in the open and we passed large groups of soldiers coming south on the trail. Also there were rest stops every four hours along the trail manned by regulars and flying the NVA flag. I was turned over to the NVA at this point, but I was so weak I could hardly walk. I propelled myself along with that bamboo cane I'd picked up when I was first struck with malaria. When I came to anything more than eight or ten inches high in the road, I would have to go over to a tree, lean against it, lower myself to the ground, and lift one leg at a time over the obstacle with my arms. Then, with my arms and shoulders, I would pull myself back up and continue along the trail. When we came to stairs cut in the mountainsides, I would have to crawl up them on my hands and knees. If they didn't think I was traveling fast enough, they would knock me down to the ground or hit me with a rifle.

Once, however, a North Vietnamese aspirant, an officer candidate, saw me being knocked down and complained that mistreating me was against Uncle Ho's teachings. He walked north with me for about three days to see I wasn't beaten anymore until, he said, any farther north and he would get into trouble.

After the aspirant left, the brutal treatment began all over again, and I was just about on my last legs. I had eaten a few fish that I caught with my hands, and a few land crabs, and the little green frogs, as well as any nuts or bugs I could find. But I could hardly walk, my morale was gone, and I was about ready to give up. Finally, down to about ninety pounds, I was in such bad shape the guards

shoved me off into this one camp that had a medic—a barefoot doctor. He looked me over and said, "This guy's almost dead." He gave the prison chasers hell, told them I had beriberi and aggravated malaria, and then proceeded to pump me full of vitamin shots. He told me, "If you can just hold on for three more days you'll be there, at the prison camp"—and then he kind of krughed and used the propaganda line they fed the prisoners to describe it—the land of milk and honey, just as if they'd translated it from the Bible.

Once again I made up my mind that I was going to hold on for three more days. I pulled myself along on the cane, saying in my mind, "Just put one foot forward of the other, just three more steps, I'm almost there." Then I'd say, "It's a piece of cake." That went through my mind all of the time. I remember very little about it except I was totally exhausted and often delirious, but I just kept that chant going all day long for the next three days. Finally I reached the top of one high mountain, and I was there. After ten months of walking, no shit, somebody said, "Welcome to the land of milk and honey."

An American Special Forces lieutenant that saw me come into camp that November day later told me he estimated that I was sixty to sixty-five years old. I was still wearing the green beret but I was hobbling, barely able to walk, the hair on my body had fallen out, and what was left on my head had turned pure white. On my arrival at Camp 102, as it was designated, a North Vietnamese Army doctor was called up from the main hospital. He went through a very elaborate performance and declared I was completely dehydrated and he was going to give me an intravenous feeding. He brought out a bottle with a piece of inner tube over the top and some plastic spaghetti tubing coming out the bottom that was filled with a sugar and water solution. He had a needle but couldn't get it in any of my veins until I finally showed him one on the back of my arm. Embarrassingly for him, after the elaborate hookup there was no act two. The vein wouldn't take anything and the audience began to wander off. Finally, the doctor sent the guard for a bowl, and he took the needle out of my arm and poured the solution into the bowl and gave it to me and said, drink it. I looked at it and thought, so this is the great medical treatment they've

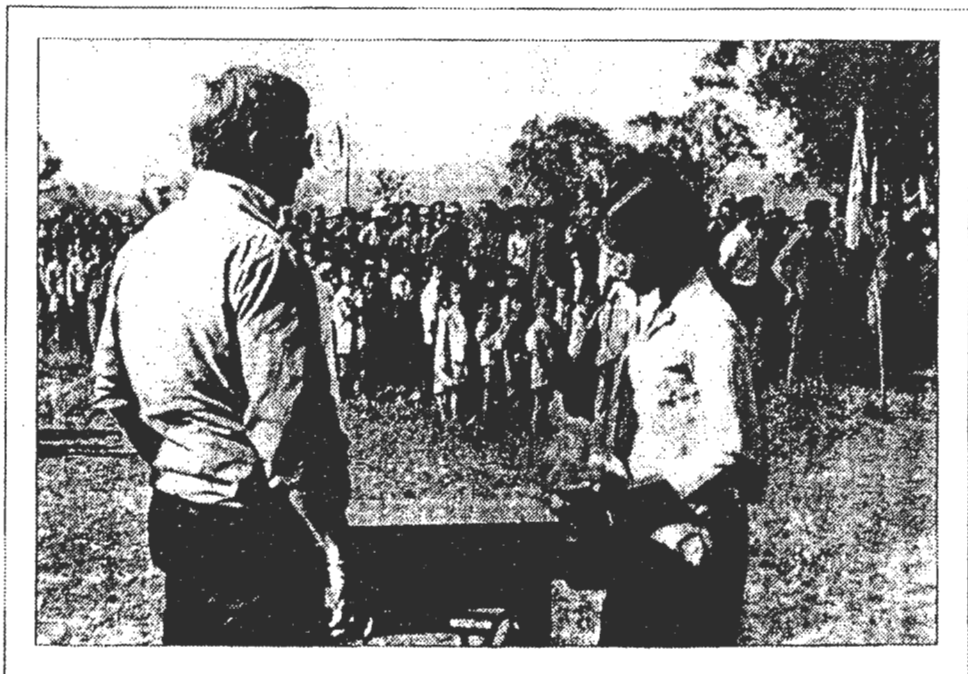
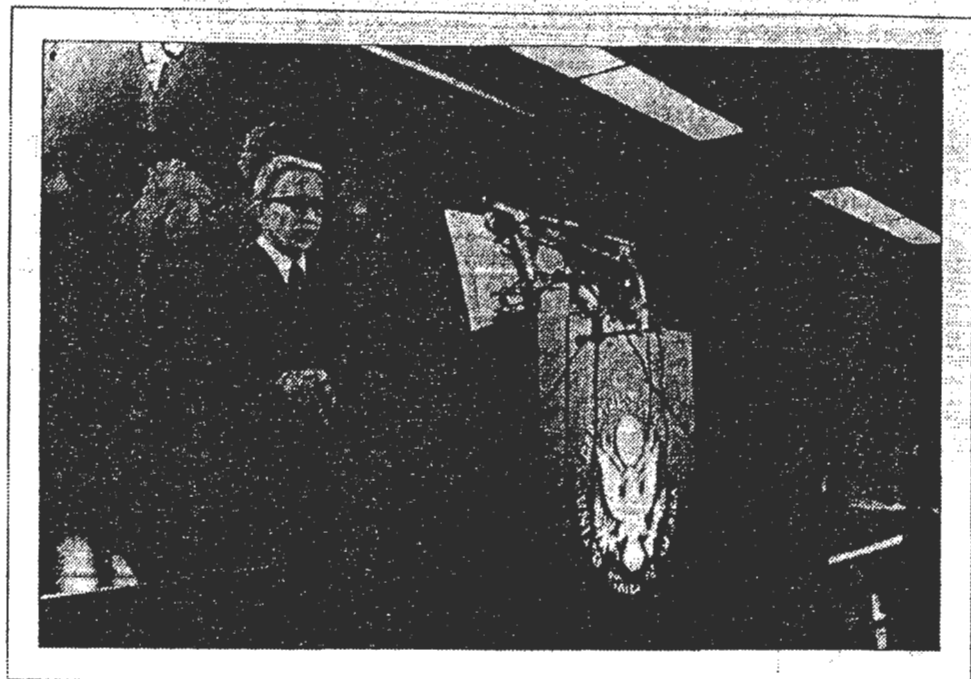
been promising me. Welcome to the land of milk and honey.

It was, however, the end of the worst period, nutritionally, of Bengé's captivity. During his year's stay in the camp in Cambodia, his food improved marginally, he received periodic treatment of his malaria, and was able to rest and regain some strength. After about three months he began "to feel like myself again," and on Christmas Day 1968 he was put in with other American prisoners. In November 1969 he was moved into Laos and then on to North Vietnam, where his final stay was in the infamous "Hanoi Hilton." He was repatriated with the military prisoners on March 12, 1973, after more than five years of imprisonment, twenty-seven of those months in solitary confinement.

I still believe in what we were doing in Vietnam. I went back in September 1973 and worked for the minister for ethnic minorities, at his invitation, helping to work out a foster parents program for American kids of montagnard descent, developing a livestock improvement program, trying to get veterans benefits for montagnards who had been in the Special Forces, and doing some political work with the montagnards. I later moved to the Philippines but continued to fly back to Vietnam when I had a vacation until it fell to the Communists.

I have absolutely no misgivings about the U.S. being in Vietnam, and looking back, I'd do it all over again. We were doing the right thing, although we weren't doing as good a job as we could have. We never carried out the reforms that we needed to. The people who were in authority knew damn well that if the Communists took over they were dead meat. We had them virtually by the balls and could have forced them to make more political, social, and economic reforms. Why didn't we? Most of the time we didn't know what needed to be done. We went over there ignorant. In the whole bureaucratic structure we never got it so that the little people could rise up into any command or authority position. We never built nationalism at the grass-roots level in South Vietnam.

It's not recognized really that there were American civilian prisoners of war. When you talk about POWs, everyone thinks that's only military. So I think you can draw a parallel, an analogy, between that and our whole presence in Vietnam. The military effort over-



shadowed everything that we did. But when I talked with the political commissars in North Vietnam, they actually felt more threatened by us, that we civilians were actually harming their cause more than the military.

To me personally I think the most appalling aspect of my whole experience is that when I got home from prison and was debriefed for the record, the tapes were never transcribed. Nobody really gave a damn about the lessons learned. Nobody really gave a damn what I found out about communism. Nobody really gave a damn about anything. •

Top. April 20, 1973. One month after his release, Bengé appears at a State Department press conference as the first POW to speak openly about his experiences in captivity.

Above. A D'Jari woman presents an award of appreciation to Bengé in Phu Ba Province after his return to Vietnam in November 1973.

A Definitive History of
the American Prisoner-of-War Experience
in Vietnam, 1964-1973

POW.

John G. Hubbell

in association with Andrew Jones and Kenneth Y. Tomlinson

READER'S DIGEST PRESS
McGraw-Hill Book Company

New York

London

St. Louis

San Francisco

Toronto

Hamburg

Mexico

VC knew the trail
ere full of VC, and
uflaged holes in the
up they would easily
the tips of the slices
nfection to a victim.
in Army Green Beret
ne night in October,
o days before being
cs, Roberts for three
t for any reason. As
ilats, it had attracted
soners had taken to
waste as far as they
e captain, who once
le to less than one
ly in tears when he

way out of here."
said, was there any
his only chance for
Kushner could not

South Vietnamese
the truth" about the
cans were to share in
killed two pigs and
proved to be a day of

ed by the camp com-
doctor was plotting
mander confided that
hner angrily assured
ne. Roberts admitted
namese knew every-
y. Roberts advised,
don't want them to
eleased so badly that

Kushner was unable to partake of the celebration feast, which consisted mainly of entrails, blood, fat, and gristle; the sight of it sickened him. His fellow prisoners gratefully consumed his share.

He was sickened, too, at Roberts's betrayal of him, and at the bitterly anti-American and antiwar speeches of the ARVN officers who were being released. If they were not authentic turncoats, Kushner thought, they certainly were unreasonably good facsimiles.

Bloody Tet, 1968! As the sacred Lunar New Year observance was getting under way, large, strong North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong forces simultaneously launched massive surprise attacks on thirty provincial capitals in South Vietnam. The completely unexpected action caught Allied forces with their defenses down. There ensued some of the bloodiest fighting of the war, much of it in the streets of Saigon and Hue. In Saigon, Viet Cong units invaded the grounds and buildings of the American Embassy, and it took hours to drive them out. In Hue, block-by-block and house-by-house fighting went on for weeks; it was late February before well-entrenched North Vietnamese main units finally were defeated. Other cities throughout the country fell into Communist hands for short periods.

American officials were quick to pronounce the Tet offensive a military and psychological failure. In fact, it won the Communists no new ground and failed to ignite the popular uprising Hanoi had hoped for—indeed, the ferocious assault seemed to unite the South Vietnamese people as nothing else had in their determination to resist the Communists. On the other hand, there were severe repercussions in the United States. Many, including Administration supporters, felt they had been misled concerning the progress of an American military effort that had become hugely expensive in terms of both blood and treasure. People were startled and disheartened at the enemy's ability to mount so widespread and powerful an attack, especially in many supposedly secure areas—one being the American Embassy. Grisly combat scenes on nightly television newscasts and in full-color news magazine coverage further eroded psychological strength. The Administration's conduct of the war came in for heavy criticism.

The Communists reaped a new harvest of American prisoners. "Surrender! Humane and lenient treatment!" The demand and

promise were issued in strained English to Michael D. Bengé, an American agriculturalist with the Agency for International Development (AID) who made his home and headquarters in Ban Me Thuot in South Vietnam's Central Highlands. A dozen North Vietnamese Army regulars, all of them armed with AK-47 automatic rifles, had risen to face him from a culvert not fifteen feet away. He had no choice but to raise his hands and climb out of his jeep.

His hands were tied behind him, a soldier appropriated his sandals, and he was marched off barefoot in the company of a fourteen-year-old Montagnard boy who had worked for him the previous year. The next day they reached a village, where a "People's Court" was in session.

Bengé recognized many of the Vietnamese who awaited trial. Mostly they were young men, some of them boys still in school. At one time or another, all had worked for the Saigon government or for the Americans. To their Communist captors, this constituted treason. Charges were read, the accused were browbeaten into "confessing," and they were led into a nearby field and shot. Recognizing the hopelessness of the situation, the fourteen-year-old at Mike's side suddenly bolted and ran for the trees. A guard shot the boy in the leg and he crumpled into the dust. The officer-judge muttered a command. The guard walked to the downed youngster, put the muzzle of his rifle in his ear, and fired.

The bloodbath lasted through the afternoon. Bengé was not "tried." Through a translator, the officer-judge interrogated him. Bengé played dumb, answering in negative monosyllables when asked the locations of the American 23rd Division and the billeting places for South Vietnamese troops. He was only a farmer, he said, an agriculture advisor. That night his captors led him onto the jungle trails.

Within a few days Bengé was joined by two other captured Americans: Betty Ann Olsen, a nurse of the Christian Missionary Alliance, who had been working in the leprosarium in Ban Me Thuot, and Henry F. Blood, a missionary of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, who had been translating the Bible into Montagnard dialects. Both had witnessed horrors similar to those Mike had seen. Three missionaries emerging from a bunker, their hands high in the air and calling out in Vietnamese, trying to surrender, had been gunned down in cold blood. Another missionary's home had been dynamited before he had been able to get out of it. Betty Ann Olsen knew of

seven others in her mission group. The deepest anguish was Flood's, whose wife and three children. He had no choice but to raise his hands and climb out of his jeep.

The three prisoners had not known their common plight and the tragedy of their situation. They talked when they could, comforted each other, and wept for each other. And they walked through the small village, their captors staged a show trial. The tribesmen were led off to execution. The mountains and trending southwest. They were moving, for in the wake of the Army patrols were everywhere, constantly prowled at low altitudes. Finding out where they were going and what they were doing.

Floyd Kushner was full of hope when the infantrymen had arrived in the jungle. Sgt. Benson,* forty-two, a sergeant for seven years, a leader, and his men accorded him the respect of worship. They called him Top, and he was badly wounded, he had fought at the front. For which for four hours they had been waiting. Reaching the jungle prison, Benson said, "I'm going to get these men out of here."

The new arrivals were herded into a camp. Cloth banners proclaiming, "Welcome to the COWs"—COW meant Communist Work Camp. Ortiz sat up front, wearing white, and his name was explained; the new arrivals were going home, that they had been thinking about the war to warrant a release. They read in which the releasees denoted their heaped praise upon their "lenient captors." Roberts, bitterly disappointed and angry, spoke, denouncing himself for his own thinking about the

*Not his real name.

lish to Michael D. Bengé, an
ncy for International Develop-
eadquarters in Ban Me Thuot in
. A dozen North Vietnamese
th AK-47 automatic rifles, had
fifteen feet away. He had no
b out of his jeep.

oldier appropriated his sandals,
e company of a fourteen-year-
for him the previous year. The
re a "People's Court" was in

Vietnamese who awaited trial.
of them boys still in school. At
or the Saigon government or for
aptors, this constituted treason.
browbeaten into "confessing,"

eld and shot. Recognizing the
urteen-year-old at Mike's side

A guard shot the boy in the leg
officer-judge muttered a com-
ed youngster, put the muzzle of

he afternoon. Bengé was not
officer-judge interrogated him.

negative monosyllables when
23rd Division and the billeting
He was only a farmer, he said,
; captors led him onto the jungle

ed by two other captured Ameri-
e Christian Missionary Alliance,
osarium in Ban Me Thuot, and
Summer Institute of Linguistics,
into Montagnard dialects. Both
ose Mike had seen. Three mis-
their hands high in the air and
to surrender, had been gunned
nary's home had been dynamited
of it. Betty Ann Olsen knew of

seven others in her mission group who had been killed. But the
deepest anguish was Flood's, who told of being led away from his
wife and three children. He had no idea what had become of them.

The three prisoners had not known each other before, but their
common plight and the tragedy of recent days bound them together.
They talked when they could, consoled each other, prayed together,
wept for each other. And they walked and walked. Once, reaching a
small village, their captors staged another "People's Court"; seven
tribesmen were led off to execution. They kept on moving, into high
mountains and trending southwesterly. Their captors had to keep
them moving, for in the wake of the Tet offensive South Vietnamese
Army patrols were everywhere, and American spotter planes con-
stantly prowled at low altitudes. And so they kept walking, wonder-
ing where they were going and what was going to become of them.

Floyd Kushner was full of hope. Nine newly captured American
infantrymen had arrived in the jungle camp, among them Army 1st
Sgt. Benson,* forty-two, a seventeen-year man with a lot of combat
time in both the Korean and Vietnam wars. Benson was a born
leader, and his men accorded him a respect that bordered on hero
worship. They called him Top, and told how, even after he had been
badly wounded, he had fought and had directed them in a battle in
which for four hours they had stood off an enemy regiment. On
reaching the jungle prison, Benson's first words to Kushner were
"I'm going to get these men out of here."

The new arrivals were herded into a meeting room strung with
cloth banners proclaiming, "Welcome the lenient and humane policy
towards COWs"—COW meant "Criminal of War." Augusto and
Ortiz sat up front, wearing white pajamas—"Liberation" pajamas, it
was explained; the new arrivals were told that the two Puerto Ricans
were going home, that they had shown sufficient progress in their
thinking about the war to warrant being "liberated." Statements were
read in which the releasees denounced the American aggression and
heaped praise upon their "lenient and humane" captors. The marine
Roberts, bitterly disappointed at being retained in captivity, also
spoke, denouncing himself for having failed to make good progress
with his own thinking about the war.

*Not his real name.

24

“Illegitimae Non Carborundum”

The jungle camp in South Vietnam, where Dr. Floyd Kushner, Top Benson, and a crowd of other American enlisted men languished, had become a living hell. The mere act of existing was torture. For a time, after Top had arrived, morale had been good. But their meager diet of a handful of rice daily and a little manioc soon reduced them to near starvation. They became gaunt, skeletal, their abdomens distended. Afflicted with dysentery, Kushner was defecating fifty to a hundred times daily. He weighed perhaps ninety pounds now, and each time he stood to make for the latrine, he would momentarily black out. Anxious to keep himself clean, he would periodically bathe in the creek that passed through the camp; it was little more than a hundred yards from the hooch, but every crawling, stumbling, falling trip took most of two hours each way.

All soon had a painful skin disease that covered them with frightful sores, the worst of them in the underarm and pubic areas; these ran

with blood and pus and mosquitoes; they itched so they would claim a relief akin to overflowing with feasting n

Men tried to keep clean a his dysentery did not allow him no choice but to soil the mess quickly. Still, the stuff

The prisoners were made a community bed made of flattened bamboo. There were hard bamboo wore large bamboo mosquito nets. There were men were not issued clothing soon were in tatters; some

Tormented by the pain and nightmares, most found edge of exhaustion.

The men tried to keep each other pasts. The same stories were little with each telling until care, for the stories got better most of all was Top Benson had been repatriated. He was taken aboard luxurious hospital most delectable meals and Red Cross girls. He told POWs had been received parades. The men gloried in out for the POWs of the era

One thing the young enlisted leadership to which they were oners. Kushner, the medic, correctly gave himself second-highest-ranking prisoner helicopter pilot who had been no leadership competence humor, for which there was for he could make people

Top was unable to do

with blood and pus and attracted swarms of jungle flies and mosquitoes; they itched so dreadfully that when men scratched they would claim a relief akin to sexual satisfaction. The sores soon were overflowing with feasting maggots.

Men tried to keep clean and to keep the encampment clean. When his dysentery did not allow a man time to reach the latrine and left him no choice but to soil the ground, he would try to clean up his mess quickly. Still, the stuff lay everywhere, all the time.

The prisoners were made to sleep crowded together on a single community bed made of hardwood boards overlaid with pieces of flattened bamboo. There were no mats to soften the surface, and the hard bamboo wore large bedsores into some men. There were no mosquito nets. There were no blankets to ward off night chill. The men were not issued clothing, and the clothes they were captured in soon were in tatters; some were left nearly naked.

Tormented by the painful symptoms of starvation and by illness and nightmares, most found sleep to be elusive. They hovered on the edge of exhaustion.

The men tried to keep each other entertained with stories of their pasts. The same stories were told again and again, and changed a little with each telling until they had changed a lot. The men didn't care, for the stories got better and better. The story they liked to hear most of all was Top Benson's account of how the Korean War POWs had been repatriated. He supplied vivid descriptions of men being taken aboard luxurious hospital ships where they had been fed the most delectable meals and taught the newest dance steps by gorgeous Red Cross girls. He told how, on reaching the United States, the POWs had been received as heroes and honored with ticker-tape parades. The men gloried in his memories of how things had turned out for the POWs of the earlier war.

One thing the young enlisted men in this camp did not get was the leadership to which they were entitled from the highest ranking prisoners. Kushner, the medical man who was the highest-ranking officer, correctly gave himself no marks as a military leader. And the second-highest-ranking prisoner, Army WO Francis G. Anton, a helicopter pilot who had been captured on January 5, 1968, displayed no leadership competence. His long suit seemed to be a sense of humor, for which there was a desperate need. He was well liked, for he could make people laugh.

Top was unable to do much work after the Vietnamese doctor



**Non
im''**

e Dr. Floyd Kushner, Top listed men languished, had ng was torture. For a time, d. But their meager diet of soon reduced them to near their abdomens distended. fecating fifty to a hundred ounds now, and each time ld momentarily black out. l periodically bathe in the little more than a hundred stumbling, falling trip took

covered them with frightful and pubic areas; these ran

removed most of the bones in his shattered left arm and hand. Still, he was knowledgeable in survival techniques and taught them to the men. He designed and supervised the building of bamboo shelving in the prisoners' lean-to-kitchen, organized cooking schedules, showed the prisoners how to conserve wood and to bank coals, kept spirits up and remained dedicated to the thought that he had to lead the Americans out of the jungle captivity.

Benson had a profound effect on Roberts, the marine who after more than two years in the jungle camp was determined to gain his release any way he could. Roberts heard the stories of Top's leadership in combat and of how he looked after his men after capture. The proud marine saw in the Army sergeant a kindred spirit, the kind of military leader he admired. He was drawn to Top and fell under his influence.

Periodically, more Americans would arrive. One was Marine Pfc. Earl Weatherman, nineteen, big, friendly, outgoing, who knew and cared nothing about the politics of the war. He had committed some transgression which had landed him in a marine brig at Da Nang and wanted out of the brig and out of the war. While resident in the brig, he had heard that the Viet Cong would give safe passage to neutral Cambodia to Americans who defected to them. Escaping from the brig, he had scouted out some Viet Cong, delivered himself unto them, and had received safe passage to the jungle prison camp. The Vietnamese thought that, like Bobby Garwood, Weatherman was a "crossover."

Except that Weatherman never really understood the deal. He did not consider himself a "crossover" but a "dropout." He thought the Viet Cong owed it to him promptly to escort him to Cambodia and turn him loose. If the Viet Cong ever planned to do so, however, they certainly intended first to extract some service from him. In the camp they fed him well and treated him well. He lived with some South Vietnamese prisoners, separate from the other Americans, and was at liberty to roam the camp. Occasionally he was able to steal cans of milk and smuggle them to the starving Americans.

Weatherman did not take kindly to his hosts' efforts to educate him in the cause in which they felt he had enlisted. He bickered constantly with his keepers. He was made to attend a political course with the other Americans, and when asked for his opinion of the just struggle of the Vietnamese people, he would not say, as he was supposed to, "The just struggle of the Vietnamese people has lasted four thousand

years, and now the U.S. imperial out." Instead, he would say, "Their lives, it's a civil war, and no and tryin' to take over and the U into North Vietnam."

Bristling, Mr. Hom, the Viet political development, would u Bobby. He is a good example."

But Weatherman became incre His liberties were withdrawn and prisoner. He began making the c cans to gather manioc. He was overpowered a guard, took his r with another American hoping to minutes guards had tracked dow rifle and he and his companion o over their heads. A guard walke his rifle between his eyes, and b other American, realizing that running. The guard fired, but t oner in the leg. It downed him, guard approached, lifting his r The other guards stopped him returned to the camp, tried bef ninety days in stocks.

These stocks were made of hooch just large enough for a si in the stocks day and night, not were forced to urinate and def beds. They were never allowe

The conditions of captivity c notice that men were exhibitin nosed Acute Brain Syndrome when the brain is denied propo Men were forgetting where t were. Sometimes a man woul steps, and forget where he ha to do.

Top Benson began to fanta Viet Cong so that he could tal

attered left arm and hand. Still, he
 hniques and taught them to the
 e building of bamboo shelving in
 ized cooking schedules, showed
 and to bank coals, kept spirits up
 ght that he had to lead the Ameri-

1 Roberts, the marine who after
 camp was determined to gain his
 heard the stories of Top's leader-
 d after his men after capture. The
 eant a kindred spirit, the kind of
 drawn to Top and fell under his

ould arrive. One was Marine Pfc.
 iendly, outgoing, who knew and
 he war. He had committed some
 in a marine brig at Da Nang and
 e war. While resident in the brig,
 ould give safe passage to neutral
 ed to them. Escaping from the
 et Cong, delivered himself unto
 e to the jungle prison camp. The
 y Garwood, Weatherman was a

ally understood the deal. He did
 but a "dropout." He thought the
 to escort him to Cambodia and
 r planned to do so, however, they
 ne service from him. In the camp
 well. He lived with some South
 the other Americans, and was at
 ally he was able to steel cans of
 ing Americans.

o his hosts' efforts to educate him
 l enlisted. He bickered constantly
 ttend a political course with the
 or his opinion of the just struggle
 not say, as he was supposed to,
 e people has lasted four thousand

years, and now the U.S. imperialists have come and must be thrown
 out." Instead, he would say, "The Vietnamese have been fightin' all
 their lives, it's a civil war, and now the Communists are comin' down
 and tryin' to take over and the U.S. is gonna kiek their ass back up
 into North Vietnam."

Bristling, Mr. Hom, the Viet Cong in charge of the Americans'
 political development, would urge, "Look at Garwood. Look at
 Bobby. He is a good example. You ought to be like him."

But Weatherman became increasingly rebellious and disrespectful.
 His liberties were withdrawn and he was treated more and more like a
 prisoner. He began making the day-long hikes with the other Ameri-
 cans to gather manioc. He was on such a trip on April 1 when he
 overpowered a guard, took his rifle, and disappeared into the jungle
 with another American hoping to make it to Cambodia. Within fifteen
 minutes guards had tracked down the two. Weatherman threw out his
 rifle and he and his companion emerged from cover with their hands
 over their heads. A guard walked to Weatherman, placed the barrel of
 his rifle between his eyes, and blew the young man's head away. The
 other American, realizing that he, too, was to be murdered, began
 running. The guard fired, but the round went low, striking the pris-
 oner in the leg. It downed him, and he writhed on the ground as the
 guard approached, lifting his rifle to complete a double execution.
 The other guards stopped him. The prisoner was beaten savagely,
 returned to the camp, tried before a kangaroo court, and sentenced to
 ninety days in stocks.

These stocks were made of bamboo. Each set was contained in a
 hooch just large enough for a single prisoner. The prisoners were kept
 in the stocks day and night, not allowed to leave for any reason. They
 were forced to urinate and defecate through the slats of the bamboo
 beds. They were never allowed to wash, or to clean themselves.

The conditions of captivity did not improve. Dr. Kushner began to
 notice that men were exhibiting bizarre mental symptoms. He diag-
 nosed Acute Brain Syndrome, a mental disorientation that occurs
 when the brain is denied proper nourishment over a prolonged period.
 Men were forgetting where they were and who their companions
 were. Sometimes a man would get up to do something, walk a few
 steps, and forget where he had been going and what he had intended
 to do.

Top Benson began to fantasize. He talked of crossing over to the
 Viet Cong so that he could take charge of the prisoners and lead them

The once proud soldier who and less concern for them. He tors for more food, tobacco, gan to steal tobacco from the that he now cared for no one in disputing Kushner's med-xtremities began to swell, the instead, Benson began stealing ciously. Even his appearance n around its bones. His once is bald head and white beard, Roberts, who admired him so, oring him to recover himself.

it it had been to remain abed aped into action at the first would stand in the center of rise and shine, to join him in cleaning up. He sounded for drill instructor. Men joined e they thought exercise and ause he insisted on it. Others loudness and arrogance. All

ned, was word from Bobby the region was coming to the ess he was to be included in a was reputed to be a political-day course. When it ended,

Thompson departed Portholes. Jr.—friends called him "J. mpson had been taken some-rescue pilot who had been cell in the same building as reen Beret officer could live n. What skin and tissue hung look to it—almost as though

One day Leonard had seen Thompson collapse, the victim of an apparent heart attack. Guards had summoned a medic, who had plunged a long hypodermic needle straight into Thompson's chest. He had been carried away, and when Leonard had made inquiries he was told that Thompson had been taken to a hospital and that he was going to be released.

Shortly afterward, Thompson and a few others were taken to another prison camp, about ten miles southwest of Hanoi. It was a penitentiary the French had built, a grim place, all heavy masonry, iron bars, and small, dark cells with heavy doors. Even by the standards of the other camps the prisoners had been in, the place was filthy. There were no lights, ventilation was poor, bathing facilities were practically nonexistent, and guards were everywhere all the time, to smother communications. Later American inhabitants were to call this prison Skid Row, for to them it would seem the end of the line. Thompson was placed in solitary confinement.

Six weeks later, the remainder of the Portholes inmate population were trucked to a camp in the countryside, perhaps fifteen miles southwest of Hanoi. They were to remain in this camp for more than two years; it was to be known to them most commonly as D-1, because one of the buildings was so marked.

In the camp in the South Vietnam jungle, the man named Ho arrived in style. Apparently a commissar, he was attended by several guards and porters, who carried his luggage and generally made him comfortable. He brought his own cook along. Vietnamese camp personnel accorded him a puling subservience.

He was taller than most other Vietnamese, and thin. He had a long, scrawny neck and buckteeth, his bespectacled eyes gleamed with fanaticism, he spoke fluent English, and displayed a talent for attracting and holding his pupils' attention. "Let me tell you criminals one thing," he said. "I can release you or I can have you killed. No one in your country knows where you are or anything about you. Each of you is at our mercy. You will learn. You will do as I say, or you will be executed for your crimes against the Vietnamese people."

School began. In the mornings Ho lectured on "The Vietnamese People's Cause," "The Americans Have Broken the Geneva Agreements," "The Vietnamese People Surely Will Win, the U. S. Surely Will Lose," and so on.

In the afternoons the prisoners were divided into several groups in

separate classrooms. Ho and Mr. Hom, the camp interpreter, were teachers and moderators; Bobby Garwood was an assistant teacher.

In a discussion one day Top Benson committed the grievous sin of referring to the Saigon army as "ARVN."* Ho seized the moment. "This militarist seeks to sabotage your course," he told the others. "He calls puppet troops 'ARVNs'!" Ho declaimed for long minutes, wondering how anyone could even think in words that connoted legitimacy to the Saigon government. When he finished he ordered Top taken away. He told the others to prepare to join in a public criticism of Top for his crimes and his attitude.

Before the session began, the other POWs managed to convey to Top that he was to pay no heed to the criticisms they were to heap upon him, to understand that they were forced to say these things and did not mean them. Top himself was made to get things started. He advised the others that he was an old-line, hard-core militarist, that he still was thinking like a first sergeant. It would be necessary, he said, that he change his ideology.

When he finished, it was announced that henceforth no one was to call him Top; he was to be called only by his last name. Kushner was also to be called and referred to by his last name; no one was to call him Doc. No terms connoting rank or respect were to be used.

The criticism session disgusted Kushner. Most of the prisoners merely went through the motions and were easy on Top, assuring him that "you must change your way of thinking," and "constructive criticism is good." But there was a trace of bitterness in the tones of some, who told him that he was "obstinate," "stubborn," "greedy," "uncouth." His personal habits and manners were deplored, and it was pointed out that he ate with his hands and made sloshing noises with his mouth when he chewed. He was called "reactionary" and an "imperialist."

He was a pathetic figure, sitting on a low stool before the group. His uniform by now was in rags, and he looked aged and weak. He made no move to brush away the flies that swarmed about the running sores on his body or to wipe away the mucus that dripped from the end of his nose into his dirty white beard. Kushner felt an enormous sadness for him.

Top spent several long nights in the camp commander's hooch, where he was threatened and hounded for a written apology for his

*Army of the Republic of Vietnam.

attempt to sabotage the course. It is Ho several times held a pistol to Top's head. He wrote a written apology that included a request for American intervention.

Four other prisoners, including Bobby Garwood, made statements to the U.S. government. When the statements were read to the prisoners and Ho delivered a valedictory. "I have learned about our culture and about the American way that we fight many aggressors: the Chinese, the Thais, the Japanese and the American imperialists. Now you must follow it. Now you are in a war."

Most of the prisoners were irritated. But there was no prisoner release. Bobby Garwood had assured him that if he was freed, his hopes had soared; now they were dashed with the others.

Notwithstanding Ho's decree that all prisoners remained deprived, hungry, sick and tired. They also remained leaderless. Bobby Garwood simply refused to work; and others who were deemed an unfair share of the work. They were angrily vicious bickering over the food. The camp was divided into factions—cliques. Bobby Garwood was the most important. For long periods, the strong prisoners who were too weak to gather together to give the others the rice that their captors gave them.

Life continued to deteriorate. Bobby Garwood, a prisoner who was roasting a pig, was killed in a moment and returned to find a note from the captors demanding to know who had eaten the pig.

"I did," Kushner confessed with remorse.

The man was enraged. "If you had not done that, I'd kill you."

Kushner nodded. He was never speaking to himself. "You know me better than anything else I have ever known."

the camp interpreter, were
 God was an assistant teacher.
 committed the grievous sin of
 N."* Ho seized the moment.
 course," he told the others.
 declaimed for long minutes,
 ink in words that connoted
 When he finished he ordered
 to prepare to join in a public
 attitude.

POWs managed to convey to
 criticisms they were to heap
 forced to say these things and
 made to get things started. He
 ie, hard-core militarist, that he
 t would be necessary, he said,

that henceforth no one was to
 by his last name. Kushner was
 last name; no one was to call
 respect were to be used.
 shner. Most of the prisoners
 vere easy on Top, assuring him
 thinking," and "constructive
 ce of bitterness in the tones of
 s "obstinate," "stubborn,"
 habits and manners were de-
 ate with his hands and made
 n he chewed. He was called

a low stool before the group.
 he looked aged and weak. He
 hat swarmed about the running
 e mucus that dripped from the
 ard. Kushner felt an enormous

he camp commander's hooch,
 1 for a written apology for his

attempt to sabotage the course. It is known that during these sessions
 Ho several times held a pistol to Top's head. At length, Top produced
 a written apology that included a condemnation of the American
 intervention.

Four other prisoners, including Kushner, were designated to write
 statements to the U.S. government demanding an end to its aggres-
 sion. When the statements were written, the political course ended
 and Ho delivered a valedictory. "As a result of this course, you have
 learned about our culture and about our country. You have learned
 that we fight many aggressors: Genghis Khan and the Mongols, the
 Chinese, the Thais, the Japanese Fascists, the French imperialists,
 and the American imperialists. Now that you know the right road,
 you must follow it. Now you are no longer criminals but prisoners of
 war."

Most of the prisoners were immensely relieved at his departure.
 But there was no prisoner release, and Roberts was crushed. Bobby
 Garwood had assured him that if he behaved correctly he would be
 freed, his hopes had soared; now he kept to himself, avoiding contact
 with the others.

Notwithstanding Ho's decree that they now were POWs, the men
 remained deprived, hungry, sick. Nothing was done to improve their
 lot. They also remained leaderless. Some were unable to work; others
 simply refused to work; and others found themselves carrying what
 they deemed an unfair share of the burden, gathering all the firewood
 and manioc and making all the fires. There was constant and increas-
 ingly vicious bickering over the division of labor. The prisoners
 divided into factions—cliques. Physical strength became all impor-
 tant. For long periods, the strong would not provide manioc for those
 who were too weak to gather their own, and some even took from
 others the rice that their captors provided.

Life continued to deteriorate, and so did the prisoners. Once, a
 prisoner who was roasting a piece of manioc left it untended for a
 moment and returned to find a small bite missing from it. He de-
 manded to know who had eaten it.

"I did," Kushner confessed. The doctor was nearly sick with
 remorse.

The man was enraged. "If you weren't so small and skinny," he
 said, "I'd kill you."

Kushner nodded. He was nearly in tears, and seemed almost to be
 speaking to himself. "You know, I probably regret doing that more
 than anything else I have ever done in my life."

The man stood staring at him. Then, mollified, he said, "Forget it."

But Kushner could not forget it. The thought that he actually had stolen food from a fellow prisoner was almost more than he could bear. He began telling himself and repeating to them all, "You must be above your environment. Don't let it make an animal out of you."

But the environment wore men down. Kushner warned the camp commander that prisoners would die unless conditions were radically improved. The warning was ignored. Shortly, when the first man to die expired in Kushner's arms, the camp commander sent emissaries with white burial clothing. Tearfully, angrily, Kushner refused to accept it. "You wouldn't give him clothing when he was alive," he shouted. "We'll bury him as he lived. Why don't you give clothing to the living, who need it?"

Then, Top died. Then a young Marine began to swell up, as Top had swollen. A stinking serum ran constantly from his scrotum, from the insides of his thighs, and from his calves. He stopped eating altogether. Kushner warned him, "If you don't eat, there is no way you can survive. You've got to try. You've got to want to live." Finally, one night, Kushner was awakened and told the boy was in distress. He cradled the lad's head in his arms and asked, "Do you know what's happening to you?"

"Yeah, Doc, I'm dying."

"Is there any message that you want me to give to your loved ones?"

"Doc," the boy breathed, "just tell them where I've been. Just tell them where I've been." Then he was gone.

Again, angrily, tearfully, Kushner warned the camp commander that all his prisoners would die unless proper medical attention and a proper diet were forthcoming.

And nothing changed.

After being captured during the Tet offensive, Mike Bengé, the AID agriculture advisor, Betty Ann Olsen, the missionary nurse, and Hank Blood, the missionary linguist, had walked the jungle trails together for months. At first, the three were kept chained together, but their North Vietnamese Army escorts, who ate well themselves, kept the prisoners on a starvation diet until they were too weak to attempt escape. Then the chains were removed. The diet was not

improved, though; it was always only occasionally a small pig or gibbon ape.

That spring of 1968 the camp commander contracted malaria. For months he was blind or blind. Betty Ann cared for him, and the camp chills shook him, feeding him until the chills began to subside.

Betty Ann was seized with malaria. She lost weight, and the joints and muscles. She was allowed to move as much as she was allowed to, but within a few weeks.

The party kept moving along. Betty Ann and Hank both developed malaria. Betty Ann was sixteen years older than Mike, and she seemed to get much sicker than he. He was recovering. In addition to the malaria, he had ugly running sores on his legs. The North Vietnamese captors were so kind that the little the Americans could do for warmth against the cold land.

One morning Blood came and told Bengé the news. He was away was a Communist base. Mike pleaded with the officials to be taken there. His pleas were not heeded. He was buried in a shallow, unmarked grave, and Betty Ann and the party moved on.

They crossed into Cambodia. In the summer, they were back in the jungle. By now, Mike's gums bled constantly. Mike had running sores; their hair had turned gray. Betty Ann was anemic and weak. She wondered to what purpose they were living for months; they seemed to be dying.

Still, they encouraged each other. Mike told Betty Ann to

en, mollified, he said, "Forget

He thought that he actually had
was almost more than he could
peating to them all, "You must
t it make an animal out of you."
own. Kushner warned the camp
unless conditions were radically
l. Shortly, when the first man to
amp commander sent emissaries
ly, angrily, Kushner refused to
clothing when he was alive," he
ed. Why don't you give clothing

arine began to swell up, as Top
onstantly from his scrotum, from
his calves. He stopped eating
If you don't eat, there is no way
/ . You've got to want to live."
vakened and told the boy was in
in his arms and asked, "Do you

want me to give to your loved

ell them where I've been. Just tell
as gone.

er warned the camp commander
ss proper medical attention and a

offensive, Mike Bengé, the AID
lsen, the missionary nurse, and
ist, had walked the jungle trails
hree were kept chained together,
escorts, who ate well themselves,
diet until they were too weak to
were removed. The diet was not

improved, though; it was always a small serving of rice and manioc,
only occasionally a small piece of fish or meat—terrapin, iguana, or
gibbon ape.

That spring of 1968 the party camped by a river. Here, Bengé
contracted malaria. For most of thirty-five days; he remained deliri-
ous or blind. Betty Ann cared for him, keeping him warm when the
chills shook him, feeding him, bathing him. At length, the attacks
began to subside.

Betty Ann was seized with a fever, headache, and severe pains in
the joints and muscles. She diagnosed dengue fever. She rested as
much as she was allowed to, increased her fluid intake, and recovered
within a few weeks.

The party kept moving all summer, trending southwesterly. Betty
Ann and Hank both developed malaria; Hank, who at fifty-three was
sixteen years older than Mike and twenty years older than Betty Ann,
seemed to get much sicker than they did and to have more difficulty
recovering. In addition to the malaria, the terrible jungle skin disease
tore ugly running sores into him, and these itched maddeningly. Their
North Vietnamese captors would do nothing for them, and there was
little the Americans could do for each other except to huddle together
for warmth against the cold monsoon rains which now were upon the
land.

One morning Blood complained of chest pains. Betty Ann exam-
ined him and told Bengé the older man had pneumonia. A short walk
away was a Communist base camp, complete with hospital facilities.
Mike pleaded with the officer in charge of the group that Blood be
taken there. His pleas were denied. It took Hank three days to die. He
was buried in a shallow, unmarked grave beside a jungle trail. Mike
and Betty Ann were allowed to say prayers over the grave. Then the
party moved on.

They crossed into Cambodia, turned north, then east. By late
summer, they were back in the vicinity of Ban Me Thuot, where they
had been captured. By now, scurvy had loosened their teeth, and their
gums bled constantly. Mike and Betty Ann were covered with run-
ning sores; their hair had turned white and came out by the fistful.
Betty Ann was anemic and suffering terribly from dysentery. They
wondered to what purpose they had traveled and suffered all these
months; they seemed to be going nowhere.

Still, they encouraged each other and tried to keep each other's
spirits up. Mike told Betty Ann of his family's ranch in Oregon and of

his three-year hitch in the Marine Corps. Betty Ann told Mike of growing up in Africa's Ivory Coast, where her parents were missionaries. They starved. They chewed at pieces of buffalo hide they found on the mountain trails; and they grabbed bamboo shoots and munched at them.

Ill and tired himself, Mike worried more and more about Betty Ann. She seemed to be giving out. Their captors showed her no mercy. When she lagged on the trails, they would slap her, knock her down, pick her up, drag her. She kept getting to her feet, moving on.

The monsoon rains hatched out the worst scourge of the Asian jungle, the bloodsucking leech. By September the jungle foliage was covered with them. They were shiny black, and some were enormous. They brushed off by the hundreds onto all who passed. One day Mike found himself following a trail of blood—anemic, dysentery-wracked Betty Ann's. When they made camp that evening, she was too weak to pick off the leeches that covered her. Mike removed them, then tried to carry water from a nearby creek to bathe her. He was not strong enough, though, and could get no help. Again he implored the officer in charge, pointing out that there was a North Vietnamese battalion encamped close by. Surely, it would have a doctor or a medic who could help Betty Ann. Perhaps he would have some medicine, some food for her, something. She was dying. The officer in charge was not interested.

Betty Ann was five days dying. Like Hank Blood, she was laid in a shallow, unmarked grave near a jungle trail. Mike prayed over her. Then the party moved on.

Alone now, Mike developed beriberi. His legs swelled so that he could barely lift them. When he came to a log he had to sit down and lift one leg at a time over it with his hands; and he dared not sit down unless there was a tree close by, so he could pull himself up again. His captors continued to do nothing for him but to keep him moving and to feed him a small ration of rice daily. It occurred to him that they were waiting for him to die. But, suddenly, he knew something they didn't know; he was not going to die. Someone had to survive, to make it known what had happened to Hank Blood and Betty Ann Olsen. It was up to him and he would do it, no matter what it took. He would do it by putting one foot ahead of the other, living one hour at a time, for as many steps and years as it took. He was going to do it.

They walked on, into a village near the Cambodian border. The wretched prisoner was displayed to the locals. "Look at this Ameri-

can," his guards shouted. "He's long. He can't walk."

Benge, who was fluent in Vietnamese, "I have walked true," he shouted. "I have walked true. These men have starved me and I have dysentery and malária, and they have no mercy of any kind. And yet I am alive, and I am walking."

The villagers muttered among themselves, and Benge was driven out of the place. They told him they called the Land of Milk and Honey. Vietnamese troops were on the march. In his determination to survive, Benge snatched, and gulping down, he ate along jungle trails. For protein, he ate beneath the bark of trees. He bathed in streams, that fish would eat his hands and legs, nibbling away the dead flesh and eat them raw.

One day the party reached a village. It was a major North Vietnamese base. The doctors used Benge for demonstrating combat medics. Benge was diagnosed with beriberi, and scurvy. He was in no order of business was to rectify the situation. To infuse a bottle of sugar water into his veins, with great difficulty finding a vein, the doctor shrunken were the veins that they had. When after an hour little more had been injected, the doctor removed the needle, put the bottle into a bowl, and ordered Benge to drink.

The demonstration completed, Benge was kept in a stockade area of the base. He occupied a cage of his own, and he was told him to be sixtyish, with his wife and a stick to help himself walk. Benge discovered that Leopold was the language.

Leopold's presence in a cage for twenty-four, he was not long.

can," his guards shouted. "He's been riding in cars and airplanes too long. He can't walk."

Benge, who was fluent in Vietnamese, spoke up in reply: "It is not true," he shouted. "I have walked halfway across your country. These men have starved me almost to death. I have beriberi and dysentery and malaria, and they have given me no medicine, no care of any kind. And yet I am alive, and I go wherever they take me."

The villagers muttered among themselves. The soldiers hustled Benge out of the place. They took him back into Cambodia, which they called the Land of Milk and Honey. Large numbers of North Vietnamese troops were on the roads of the supposedly neutral country. In his determination to survive, Mike became expert at spotting, snatching, and gulping down edible nuts and fruits, as he moved along jungle trails. For protein, he ate certain of the insects he found beneath the bark of trees. He discovered, when he was allowed to bathe in streams, that fish would clean the running sores on his arms and legs, nibbling away the dead flesh; then he would grab the fish and eat them raw.

One day the party reached a large clearing in the Cambodian jungle. It was a major North Vietnamese base with a sizable hospital. The doctors used Benge for demonstration purposes in training a group of combat medics. Benge was diagnosed as having acute malnutrition, beriberi, and scurvy. He was also badly dehydrated, and the first order of business was to rectify this condition. An attempt was made to infuse a bottle of sugar water into him intravenously. A doctor had great difficulty finding a vein in the patient's bony arm, and so shrunken were the veins that the fluid was accepted only very slowly. When after an hour little more than a spoonful had gotten into Mike, a doctor removed the needle, poured the remaining contents of the bottle into a bowl, and ordered the patient to drink it.

The demonstration completed, Mike was ushered to a cage-like hut in a stockade area of the base. U.S. Army Lt. Steve (Stephen R.) Leopold (captured on May 9, 1968), a Green Beret officer who occupied a cage of his own, watched Benge approach. He guessed him to be sixtyish, with his white hair and beard, and the way he used a stick to help himself walk. Soon, the two were communicating. Benge discovered that Leopold knew Latin, and was anxious to learn the language.

Leopold's presence in a Communist cage was ironic. Only twenty-four, he was not long away from the campus of Stanford

s. Betty Ann told Mike of here her parents were mis-pieces of buffalo hide they grabbed bamboo shoots and

more and more about Betty their captors showed her no by would slap her, knock her ting to her feet, moving on. worst scourge of the Asian ember the jungle foliage was slack, and some were enorls onto all who passed. One a trail of blood—anemic, ney made camp that evening, hes that covered her. Mike from a nearby creek to bathe and could get no help. Again ng out that there was a North by. Surely, it would have a Ann. Perhaps he would have aething. She was dying. The

Hank Blood, she was laid in a trail. Mike prayed over her.

i. His legs swelled so that he o a log he had to sit down and ds; and he dared not sit down could pull himself up again. him but to keep him moving daily. It occurred to him that suddenly, he knew something die. Someone had to survive, o Hank Blood and Betty Ann it, no matter what it took. He the other, living one hour at a took. He was going to do it. r the Cambodian border. The locals. "Look at this Ameri-

University, where in 1965 and 1966 he had been editor of the *Daily*. In that capacity, he had mounted cogent stands against the conduct of the war, and had favored restricting the American involvement to military advisors, to train the South Vietnamese to fight their own war. Like many other editorialists of the time, he had not had his way.

Finishing at Stanford, Leopold had been accepted by graduate schools at both Harvard and Columbia, to study international relations. He had been tired of school, though, and despondent after his girlfriend jilted him. An idealist, Leopold had thought hard about joining the Peace Corps; he had not done so because he had been unable to see any value for underdeveloped countries in his educational background of history and political science. It had occurred to him that Army Special Forces, the Green Berets, were a sort of armed Peace Corps, engaged as they were in civic action programs that included teaching people to defend themselves. And so here he was, engaged in Cambodia, his camp in South Vietnam's tri-border area with Cambodia and Laos having been overrun by North Vietnamese regulars a month after his arrival in the country.

He began teaching Latin to Bengé: "*Illegitimae non carborundum*"—"Don't let the bastards wear you down!"



Fidel, Kasle

At the Zoo, in Hanoi, the Cuban and whom they called were never to be certain of agreed that it was to teach captured American military the same subject on behalf of

Fidel had selected a dozen with them one by one. He at ing military information ar campaign. It seemed clear, a the men; perhaps Hanoi's my mind and will were more ef In any event, the prisoners j set their own minds and wil unable to show his hosts, furious, he turned to savager ings. So intense was the mi acquiesced to Fidel's enrag



8823425

United States Department of State

Washington, D.C. 20520

August 11, 1988

'88 AUG 11 P3:49

MEMORANDUM FOR MR. DONALD P. GREGG
THE WHITE HOUSE

SUBJECT: Letter to Vice President Bush from Mr. Michael Bengel

Mr. Bengel wrote the Vice President on July 18 to register dissatisfaction over the treatment of civilian government employees who died or were held as prisoners of war in Vietnam. His letter notes the absence of civilian names from the Vietnam War Memorial, and further notes that civilian POWs (including himself) have not received Presidential Medals in recognition of their sacrifice.

Mr. Bengel was taken prisoner in 1968 while serving in Vietnam with the Agency for International Development (AID). During his captivity, he remained on AID's rolls, and was promoted to a higher rank in the Foreign Service. After his release in 1973, he received the Award for Valor and was honored along with other civilian POWs at a White House ceremony. In addition, AID gave Mr. Bengel special training in forest agriculture, in the Philippines. Since then, Mr. Bengel has successfully resumed his AID career, and has acquired a worldwide reputation as an expert in re-forestation.

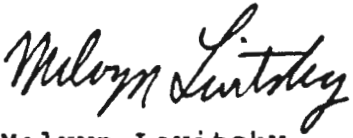
Mr. Bengel is correct in noting that the Presidential Medal has been awarded only to military POWs of the Vietnam era. For better or worse, the relative handful of civilian POWs have been handled differently from their military colleagues. The combination of pay retention while in captivity and special assistance in career development thereafter, such as Mr. Bengel experienced, has been the pattern for civilians.

Regarding memorials for those who died in Vietnam, it may be worth noting that the American Foreign Service Association maintains a memorial in the main entrance to the Department of State. The memorial is a marble wall plaque which lists the name, and date and place of death of all Foreign Service personnel who were killed in the line of duty. The plaque includes over 30 names from the Vietnam era.

EAY

DL
VLC
9

Attached for the Vice President's signature is a brief reply to Mr. Bengé, which I recommend that he sign.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Melvyn Levitsky".

Melvyn Levitsky
Executive Secretary

Attachments:

- Tab 1 - Letter to Mr. Bengé
- Tab 2 - Letter from Mr. Bengé

Department of State

Draft Reply

Dear Mr. Bengé:

Thank you for your letter of July 15 regarding civilian employees who served in Vietnam. It is certainly true that our country's mission in Vietnam relied on the efforts of both military and civilian personnel. Those like you who had the misfortune to be held as prisoners of war know full well that all of our citizens who served in Vietnam did so at great personal sacrifice.

I believe that this sentiment is widely held. The crowds who regularly throng the Vietnam Memorial are there for many reasons. Some may see the Vietnam Memorial as a shrine to the soldiers, sailors and airmen who gave their lives in that conflict. But I believe that most Americans feel that the Memorial has a significance that reaches beyond that worthy cause. For them, it symbolizes America's recognition of the service and sacrifice rendered by all Americans involved in the war, military or civilian, living or dead.

In your own case, it is my understanding that since your release from captivity you have become a world renowned expert

on re-forestation, and that the projects and programs in which you have so often played a leading role are helping to improve the lives of thousands around the world. In a very real sense your work, perhaps even more than your Award for Valor, will become your most impressive memorial. Allow me to add my congratulations to a long and distinguished list.

Sincerely,

George Bush

Mr. Michael D. Benge,
2300 Pimmit Drive, #604-W,
Falls Church, Virginia.

OFFICE OF THE VICE PRESIDENT

8823425

REFERRAL

To: Director, Secretariat Staff (S/S-S)
Department of State
Room 7241

Date: August 1, 1988

ACTION REQUESTED

- Draft reply for:
 - Vice President's signature.
 - Undersigned's signature.
- Memorandum for use as enclosure to reply.
- Direct reply.
- Furnish information copy.
- Suitable acknowledgment or other appropriate handling.
- Furnish copy of reply, if any.
- For your information.
- For comment.

NOTE

Prompt action is essential.
If more than 48 hours' delay is encountered, please telephone the undersigned immediately.

Basic correspondence should be returned when draft reply, memorandum, or comment is requested.

REMARKS:

Requested response from OPM also.

Description:

Letter; Telegram; Other:

To: Vice President Bush
 From: Michael D. Bengtson
 Date: July 15, 1988
 Subject: Civilian government employees who were also POWs.

By direction of the Vice President

Vicky Potter
 Vicky Potter
 Staff Assistant
 OEOB Rm 292
 395-6076

July 15, 1988

OFFICE OF THE
VICE PRESIDENT

'88 JUL 18 A7:51

Vice President George Bush
Old Executive Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20506

PR23425

Dear Mr. Vice President:

I have had the opportunity to meet with you on several occasions, such as the screening of the film "Hanoi Hilton." I wish to bring to your attention an inequity: President Reagan's honoring armed forces personnel who were POWs by presenting them with a Presidential Medal (see enclosed), while not recognizing those civilian government employees who were also POWs and served our country as honorably and suffered as much.* For example, there were a number Foreign Service Officers of such agencies as the State Department, CIA and the Agency for International Development (A.I.D.) who were incarcerated and many more who died in Viet Nam.

Civilian government employees are often berated while those in uniform are given medals. The 58,156 names on the wall of the Viet Nam Memorial are those of only U.S. armed forces personnel. There are no names of civilians killed while serving in an official capacity from various government agencies. A.I.D. alone lost 37 killed in Viet Nam.

The Government has chosen to single out and honor the nurses who served in Viet Nam with a statue (deservedly so), while civilian government employees who served and died there are being forgotten. There were more A.I.D. people who served in Viet Nam than nurses--and 37 A.I.D. people were killed while eight nurses were.

I am sure that it has just been an oversight that civilian Foreign Service Officers who were Prisoners of War were not awarded the Presidential Medal and that you will want to eliminate this inequity.

Sincerely,

Michael D. Bengé

Michael D. Bengé
2300 Pimmit Drive, #604-W
Falls Church, VA 22043

*While serving as an economic advisor to the South Vietnamese Government for the Agency for International Development--1968-73, I was captured in South Viet Nam by the North Vietnamese in the course of rescuing a number of Americans and was incarcerated by for over five years (see enclosed).

UNCLASSIFIED
NSC/S PROFILE

RECORD ID: 8806571
RECEIVED: 12 SEP 88 10

TO: POWELL

FROM: LEVITSKY, M

DOC DATE: 10 SEP 88
SOURCE REF: 8825948

KEYWORDS: POWS
VIETNAM

MIAS
MP

PERSONS:

SUBJECT: LTR TO PRES RE DISSATISFACTION OVER TREATMENT / CIVILIAN GOVT
EMPLOYEES WHO DIED OR WE HELD AS POW IN VIETNAM

ACTION: NO FURTHER ACTION REQUIRED DUE DATE: 15 SEP 88 STATUS: C

STAFF OFFICER: CHILDRESS

LOGREF:

FILES: WH

NSCIF:

CODES:

D O C U M E N T D I S T R I B U T I O N

FOR ACTION
CHILDRESS

FOR CONCURRENCE
KELLY, J

FOR INFO
KELLY, B
ROSTOW

COMMENTS:

DISPATCHED BY _____ DATE _____ W/ATTCH: YES NO

OPENED BY: NSEF

CLOSED BY: NSEF

DOC 2 OF 2

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED
ACTION DATA SUMMARY REPORT

RECORD ID: 8806571

DOC ACTION OFFICER

CAO ASSIGNED ACTION REQUIRED

002 CHILDRESS
002

Z 88091210 PREPARE MEMO FOR POWELL
X 88091314 NO FURTHER ACTION REQUIRED

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED
NSC/S PROFILE

RECORD ID: 8806571
RECEIVED: 12 SEP 88 10

TO: POWELL

FROM: LEVITSKY, M

DOC DATE: 10 SEP 88
SOURCE REF: 8825948

KEYWORDS: POWS
VIETNAM

MIAS
MP

PERSONS:

SUBJECT: LTR TO PRES RE DISSATISFACTION OVER TREATMENT / CIVILIAN GOVT
EMPLOYEES WHO DIED OR WE HELD AS POW IN VIETNAM

ACTION: PREPARE MEMO FOR POWELL DUE DATE: 15 SEP 88 STATUS: S

STAFF OFFICER: CHILDRESS

LOGREF:

FILES: WH

NSCIF:

CODES:

DOCUMENT DISTRIBUTION

FOR ACTION
CHILDRESS

FOR CONCURRENCE
KELLY, J

FOR INFO
KELLY, B
ROSTOW

9/13/88
To: NSC Secretariat
provided to Chuck Donovan
Close out

COMMENTS:

DISPATCHED BY _____ DATE _____ W/ATTCH: YES NO

OPENED BY: NSEF

CLOSED BY:

DOC 2 OF 2

UNCLASSIFIED