

Intelligence Support to Communications with US POWs in Vietnam

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How was it that the US military in Washington, DC, could know of, consider, and communicate approval of an escape plan the POWs themselves had proposed?

On 2 and 4 May 1972, two US Air Force SR-71 Blackbird reconnaissance aircraft overflew Hanoi, North Vietnam. A third aircraft stood back, ready to take the place of either plane if it was unable to perform its task. The pilots had not been told the objective of their unusual mission. At precisely noon on each day, flying at supersonic speed, the lead plane set off a sonic boom. Exactly 15 seconds later the second aircraft's signature shock wave signaled to US prisoners of war (POWs) held captive in the Hoa Lo prison that their proposed escape plan had been authorized.¹

Earlier, in April, Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, signed a memorandum to the Commander in Chief of the US Pacific Command approving Operation Thunderhead, the code name assigned to the US Seventh Fleet's POW rescue mission.² The amphibious-transport submarine USS *Grayback*, with a platoon of Navy SEALs on board, was deployed off the coast of North Vietnam in June to rescue any POW who had managed to escape and reach a predetermined rendezvous point, a small island at the mouth of the Red River. The platoon was directed to establish an observation post on the island and keep watch.³ Given the operation's military risks and political implications, it is reasonable to assume that

President Richard Nixon knew of and had authorized the operation.

How was it that the US military in Washington, DC, could know of, consider, and communicate approval of an escape plan the POWs themselves had proposed? How did the Navy's on-scene operational commanders know the plan's details in order to deploy suitable forces to identify and rescue escaping prisoners at the correct location and time?

The answers to these questions rest in the innovative and courageous ways the POWs in the Hoa Lo prison—widely referred to as the Hanoi Hilton—communicated among themselves and then with the outside world. Communication with Washington involved the covert assistance of CIA, which worked with the Pentagon and other intelligence agencies to make possible a communication channel maintained during the POWs' prolonged confinement.

After their release in 1973, some former POWs wrote in memoirs about the covert communication techniques. Histories of POW experiences have related others. More details are contained in the book *Spycraft: The Secret History of the CIA's Spyspechs, from Communism to Al-Qaeda* by former chief of CIA's technical operations division Robert Wallace

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US POW Camps in North Vietnam, 1965–1973



(U) Small numbers of US POWs were held in South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, but the majority, mostly Navy and Air Force aviators, were held in 15 camps dispersed in North Vietnam. The largest was Hoa Lo prison, in central Hanoi. Data derived from map in official DOD history of Vietnam War POWs.

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and coauthor Keith Melton. Additional information was contained in the documentary film *The Spy in the Hanoi Hilton*—a 2015 Smithsonian Channel release—which provides a still fuller accounting of the covert communication effort.⁴

In Robert Wallace's judgment, the effort to communicate with US POWs ranks as one of the most important operations in CIA's history.⁵ Covert POW communications—radio transmissions, messages employing so-called secret writing, and coded letters and postcards sent to family members and then shared with US intelligence agencies—made possible several important developments during the long years of captivity many POWs experienced. Beyond providing opportunities to prepare realistic escape plans, the communication network provided militarily significant information to the Department of Defense (DoD) and US intelligence agencies.

Information provided to POWs also helped sustain morale. The combination of personal fortitude, religious faith, and communication between prisoners and with friends outside prison walls helped sustain hope and life. "Knowledge was both a shield and a sword for those of us fighting the enemy without benefit of conventional weapons," said Air Force Maj. Samuel R. Johnson, a pilot shot down in April 1966 and imprisoned in the Hanoi Hilton.⁶

Hell on Earth

According to a DoD history, 771 US military personnel were captured during the Vietnam War. Of that

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number, 113 died in captivity and 658 were returned to US control.⁷ Small numbers of prisoners were held in South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, but the majority of POWs, mostly Navy and Air Force aviators, were imprisoned in 15 camps dispersed in North Vietnam. (See map on facing page.)

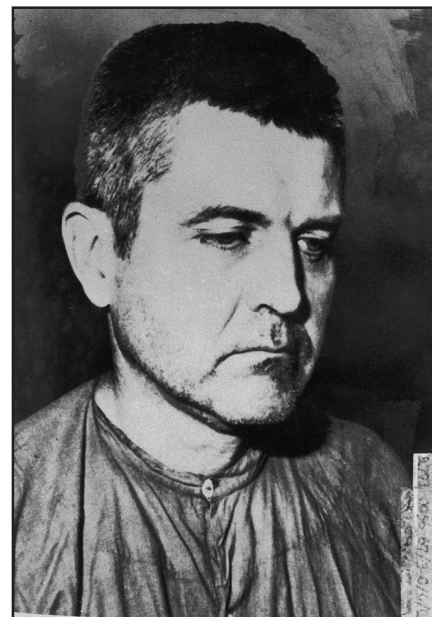
The Hoa Lo prison in central Hanoi, built by the French during their colonial rule of Vietnam, was the largest. It was dubbed the Hanoi Hilton in 1966 by Lt. Cdr. Robert Shumaker during his imprisonment there after he found in a shower a bucket with the Hilton name on its bottom.

Before North Vietnam improved its treatment of captured aviators in 1970, many POWs were exploited for intelligence and propaganda purposes. Intimidation, physical abuse, and torture were used to enforce strict obedience to prison rules, break the will of prisoners, make them reveal information about their fellow prisoners, obtain written or recorded admissions of guilt as war criminals, and to extract statements critical of the US-led war. "If hell is here on earth," Johnson observed, "it is located on an oddly shaped city block in downtown Hanoi ... and goes by the name of Hoa Lo."⁸

Cdr. James "Jim" B. Stockdale was imprisoned at Hoa Lo in September 1965 after his A-4 Skyhawk jet was downed by anti-aircraft fire during a mission over North Vietnam. He was the senior US naval officer held captive during the war.

During his confinement, he experienced several severe torture sessions, was forced to wear heavy leg irons for two years, and spent four years in solitary confinement. He would become one of the most inspiring and heroic leaders in the ranks of US POWs. Together with a number of other POWs, he became a skilled communicator—both within the walls of North Vietnamese prison camps and with US intelligence agencies.

Stockdale quickly became adept at learning the "tap code" that most US prisoners had adopted and memorized by the time he was captured. He also learned other communication methods such as notes written on a single piece of rough toilet paper and left in designated "dead drops" (concealed locations) in the camp for



Cdr. James B. Stockdale pictured on 1 January 1966. Photo © Kim Komenich/The LIFE Images Collection/Getty

“We were texting long before the young people today, because we were texting on the wall,” said Lt. Cdr. Eugene “Red” McDaniel, shot down in May 1967.

other prisoners to retrieve. Another resourceful POW, Cdr. Jeremiah “Jerry” Denton, Stockdale’s classmate at the US Naval Academy, devised a “sweep code” under the watchful eyes of North Vietnamese guards. The rhythm of his broom while sweeping in the prison court yard transmitted coded messages throughout his cell block.

Prisoners exchanged messages to describe their interrogations so others knew what to anticipate when they were subjected to questioning. Newly captured prisoners would pass on news and information from beyond the prison’s walls. Resistance and escape plans were coordinated. A chain-of-command structure, often led by Stockdale as the senior ranking officer (SRO), was developed to restore military discipline and morale. He developed new rules governing prisoner behavior during con-

finement and interrogation sessions, ultimately described as “Unity Over Self.” Time and again, leadership, faith, and communications sustained a POW during the darkest days of his imprisonment.

“We were texting long before the young people today, because we were texting on the wall,” said Lt. Cdr. Eugene “Red” McDaniel, shot down in May 1967. “If you’re out of communications with other prisoners for a long period of time, we found that after 30 days you begin to go off the deep end. You lose touch. It’s important for you to contact people on a daily basis.”⁹ As their captivity stretched from months to years, Stockdale and other POWs became adept communicators in other ways.



The Hoa Lo prison, built by the French during their colonial rule of Vietnam. US prisoners dubbed it the Hanoi Hilton. Official DoD photo, 31 May 1973.

Dangerous Business

In December 1965, three months after his capture, Stockdale was allowed to write his first letter to his wife, Sybil. He was authorized to write again two months later. She received both letters in April 1966. Noting confusing references to friends and nicknames used out of context, she contacted naval intelligence officials in San Diego.

It turned out that Stockdale had used “doubletalk” in his first letter to suggest the names of several other aviators held prisoner. An oblique reference to novelist Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon* (a book that describes physical and emotional torture inside a Stalinist gulag) also suggested conditions in the prison were not as tolerable as the North Vietnamese wanted people around the world to believe.¹⁰

Sybil was soon placed in touch with Cdr. Robert Boroughs, a Naval Intelligence officer stationed in Washington, DC. She met with him at the Pentagon in May 1966 and again in July. During the second meeting, she told him she would cooperate with naval intelligence to communicate covertly with her husband. “It is a dangerous business,” Boroughs told her, and “you are taking his life into your own hands.”¹¹ The collaboration between the Stockdales, naval intelligence, and the CIA, which the Office of Naval Intelligence engaged for technical assistance, lasted for the duration of the war.

In Love and War, the autobiography the Stockdales published, the two described the origins of clandestine communications with the Hanoi Hilton’s residents. Meeting at the Stock-

dale's home in Coronado, CA, or in Washington, DC, Sybil and Boroughs coordinated their plans carefully. Her first coded letter to Stockdale, mailed in October 1966 included a Polaroid photograph, prepared by a specialist in CIA. The picture contained a covert message sandwiched between the sealed layers of the photographic paper. Clues in Sybil's letter led her husband to soak the photograph in water.

The note Stockdale found explained that the letter in the envelope was written on invisible carbon paper. Future letters with an odd date would also be written on such paper. The paper could be used again. Any photo with a rose pictured should be soaked. Instructions described how to use the treated paper to write a letter in invisible ink. When the paper was placed on top of an ordinary sheet of writing paper, Stockdale could impress an invisible message on it that would later be revealed through chemical processing by the CIA technician who had prepared the material.

Stockdale received the letter two months later, on Christmas Eve. Alone in his cell, almost by accident, he soaked the photo to reveal its hidden message. He realized that the instructions and paper he held could make him vulnerable to charges of espionage and war crimes, but he also recognized "a whole new world" had opened up for him.

The World of Secret Writing

As 1966 ended, 13 months of abuse had begun to take a toll on Stockdale. Reflecting on his father's plight 47 years later, Dr. James B.

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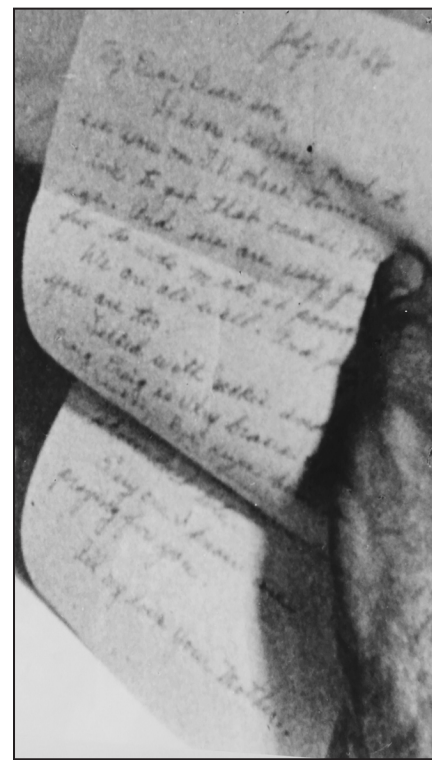
Stockdale II said, "After months and months in solitary confinement and realizing his prison mates were being treated very brutally, he was looking for some way to overcome the inevitable depressions that come with solitary confinement."

Stockdale's first, one-page letter to Sybil using the invisible carbon paper was dated 2 January 1967. It named more than 40 POWs held in captivity. He also reported "experts in torture, hand and leg irons 16 hours a day."¹² A second letter followed, updating his list of POWs, emphasizing the importance of targeting Hanoi's propaganda radio station and the north-south rail lines to the east of the city with air strikes, and providing information on the questions being asked during prisoner interrogations.

Before 1970, the pace of letter exchanges depended on the whims of North Vietnam's leadership in allowing religious or anti-war delegations (primarily American) to visit and serve as mail couriers.¹³ Letters could take many months or years to

be exchanged. In the case of Stockdale's first response, Sybil's had it in her hands in just over a week. She notified Commander Boroughs and sent him the letter. Stockdale and other POWs derived quiet satisfaction in knowing that such anti-war delegations were unknowingly serving their needs.

Boroughs arrived in Coronado soon after and escorted Sybil to a naval intelligence office in San Diego, where he showed her the CIA's chemically processed secret message that her husband had penned. She



POW holds letter dated July 1968. CIA's Technical Services Division had devised ways to include secret writing in some POW's communications from home. Photo: origin and date uncertain.

a. Spurred by Stockdale's revelations, Sybil later expressed to the highest levels of the US government and to the news media her concerns over North Vietnam's failure to abide by the Geneva Conventions. Encouraged by Commander Boroughs, she met with the wives of other POWs living in San Diego who had similar concerns. Their efforts were instrumental in the eventual establishment of the National League of POW/MIA Families in 1970. The league's activities played an important role in blunting North Vietnam's strategy for using POWs in its propaganda offensive.

“Exfiltration of downed pilots and imprisoned soldiers from behind enemy lines was a CIA and military priority throughout the war.”

was devastated to learn that he was being subjected to sustained torture. “The letter was hard for my mother to read and hard for her to share,” her son James later observed.

The technology CIA’s technician used had its origins in a World War II, classified US Army program known as Military Intelligence Service “X” (MISX). From their top secret base at Fort Hunt, Virginia, Army intelligence officers successfully established clandestine communications with American POWs held in all 63 German camps. The highly classified intelligence operation helped hundreds of US POWs to escape.¹⁴

After being established in 1947, the CIA continued and expanded the effort. The CIA’s technical support for its own covert operations or to the US military improved steadily during the Cold War. The agency’s Technical Services Staff was established in 1951 to consolidate technical support for field operations and to conduct research and development to improve collection activities.¹⁵ Renamed the Technical Services Division (TSD) in 1960, it provided operational support for missions in North and South Vietnam after the CIA’s initial involvement in the war in 1961.

“Exfiltration of downed pilots and imprisoned soldiers from behind enemy lines was a CIA and military priority throughout the war,” Robert Wallace and H. Keith Milton wrote in their comprehensive account of the agency’s technical achievements during the Cold War.¹⁶ “The captured

and missing would not be forgotten or abandoned.”

According to Wallace, his office employed a large number of chemists during the Cold War to develop various secret-writing compounds. They taught secret-writing techniques to people who might need to use them. “The basic form of communications—covert communications at the time—was secret writing,” Wallace said. The TSD undercover, working-level technical officer responsible for the program was named David E. Coffey.^{a, 17} After his normal day’s work, Coffey would return at night to his office to work secretly on developing the systems necessary to enable POW covert communications.¹⁸

The program was enormously important for several reasons. Secret messages, sent with the cooperation of spouses or other family members, would boost POW morale when they learned their welfare was a concern. POW communications could confirm the number and identity of prisoners, where they were imprisoned, and the details of their capture. This information offered valuable intelligence to US military planners contemplating rescue operations. The families of POWs were another important consideration. When POWs provided lists of the names of their fellow prisoners, their next of kin could be informed they were alive and held captive. The families of deceased ser-

a. In Wallace’s book and in the film, Coffey was referred to as Brian Lipton.

vice members were afforded a degree of closure.¹⁹

Introducing Coded Messages

During the earliest years of the war, comparatively few opportunities for sending and receiving mail existed.^{b, 20} Prisoners were moved to new camps without notice, and prison guards conducted unannounced, rigorous inspections of all prisoners and cells. A prisoner caught in the act of using the invisible-ink carbon paper faced severe reprisals—possibly execution for espionage. Such measures made it difficult to keep the paper indefinitely. Stockdale, for example, received another letter with carbon papers from Sybil in February 1967, but he was forced to eat his last piece of paper later that year to avoid compromising the communication channel.

Like most POWs, Stockdale had not been instructed in sophisticated methods of encryption. With the last of his carbon paper gone, Stockdale returned to “doubletalk” to signal sensitive information in his letters, a technique taught in some of the Navy’s survival, evasion, resistance, and escape (SERE) schools.

Fortunately, a small number of POWs had, in fact, learned more advanced, classified encryption methods during advanced SERE training.²¹ Stockdale was first exposed to the techniques after he and 10 other prisoners were transferred to a new prison camp in north-central Hanoi

b. Commander Boroughs thought it would be “sheer luck” if Stockdale received two coded letters in a year.

on the grounds of the Ministry of National Defense in late October 1967. The prison had earned the nickname “Alcatraz.”

The North Vietnamese had decided to imprison the more senior and “incorrigible” POWs in Alcatraz after identifying them as POW-resistance leaders. Two, Lt. George Coker and Capt. George McKnight, had escaped briefly from another prison camp. In addition to troublesome senior officers like Stockdale and Denton, the remaining men included some of the POWs’ most gifted communicators.

POW memoirs name such officers as Cdr. Howard Rutledge, Cdr. Howard Jenkins, Lt. Cdr. Nels Tanner, Lt. Cdr. Robert Shumaker, and Cdr. James Mulligan as powerful communicators. “Bob Shumaker was in a class by himself,” said Denton, “... slicker than anyone at inventing new ways to communicate.”²² Shumaker taught Maj. Sam Johnson how to send coded messages while both were imprisoned at Alcatraz.²³

Held in solitary confinement (wearing leg irons applied at night), Stockdale learned that one of the POWs (popularly called “the master communicator”) had been trained in advanced cryptography. Unable to communicate with him directly using the tap code, the two devised an innovative workaround to signal to one another across the courtyard between their cells. James Stockdale II explained that the other prisoner extended his foot almost outside the door to his cell so that Stockdale could see his big toe. “With his big toe using Morse code and some other modified methods over a period of four or five days, the prisoner ... taught dad this cryptographic code and, again,



Son Tay prison was located more than 20 miles northwest of Hanoi. POWs held there were able eventually communicate their location. The knowledge allowed the United States to mount a rescue attempt. Unfortunately, the prisoners had been removed before the November 1970 raid. DoD photo dated 31 May 1973.

opened up a channel of communication that he had not anticipated.”²⁴

Stockdale and his small group memorized the code. POWs trained in the encryption code would employ it for covert communications for the remainder of their captivity. “As long as the POWs who did know the code were allowed to write, they’d secretly embed their letters home with prisoner names, the realities of their conditions, or whatever CAG [i.e., Stockdale] ordered; occasionally they’d also receive letters from their wives that the government had encoded.”^{a, 25} Red McDaniel was later instructed in the code by some of his cellmates. “We did that as a lifeline,” he said. “And so we knew that the

a. “CAG” was one of Stockdale’s nicknames; at the time he was shot down, he was the commander of Air Group 16 (CAG) on the aircraft carrier USS Oriskany (CV-34)

US knew what was happening in the camp.”²⁶

Finally, 10 of the prisoners incarcerated at Alcatraz were returned to Hoa Lo in December 1969. Their 11th comrade, Air Force Capt. Ronald Storz, was not. Physically and mentally broken by years of solitary confinement and ruthless beatings, he died in captivity in 1970—remembered by other Alcatraz captives as “the hero we left behind.”^{b, 27}

b. A seven-year study of POW/MIA’s found that, outside of the event of capture itself and actual physical torture, solitary confinement is perhaps the most stressful of captor treatments. See Edna J. Hunter, *Wartime Stress: Family Adjustment to Loss* (Report # TR-USIU-8107, San Diego, CA, United States International University, 1981)

Intelligence and covert communications improved to the point that new opportunities to mount rescue operations emerged.

Son Tay

The mid-years of the POWs' captivity in Vietnam during the late 1960s saw them experience some of the most extreme forms of abuse and torture. Some contemplated suicide. Some, like Stockdale, actually attempted to take their own lives rather than capitulate to their captors' demands. Others prayed for death. "I figured that I had about a one-in-four chance of coming out alive and about a one-in-fifty chance of coming out sane enough to live a normal life," Denton said of those years.²⁷

Mercifully, early in 1970, several factors led to a gradual improvement in the conditions and treatment of most POWs. They referred to these years as "the good-guy era." Notably, in May 1969, the Nixon administration, led by Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, renounced the Johnson administration's public policies with respect to the plight of the POWs. Nixon decided to "go public" to publicize their abuse and torture. Three POWs released to the United States described their harrowing experiences to the news media and in public appearances around the country to counter North Vietnam's propaganda campaign. The National League of POW/MIA Families stepped up its efforts.

Other developments were at play. In November 1969, two months after the death of Ho Chi Minh, North Vietnam's Politburo promulgated a resolution to improve the treatment of captured American pilots. One motivation for doing so was "... to win

over the American people." Of note, North Vietnam's decree stated POWs should be allowed to send one letter a month and receive gifts once every two months.²⁸ Prison authorities soon began to implement the new policies in their camps in North Vietnam.

The ramifications were significant for the POWs and US intelligence as the flow of letters and receipt of gift parcels surged. By the end of 1970, the families of more than 330 POWs had received more than 3,000 letters—compared to a total of just 100 families receiving 600 letters by the beginning of 1969.²⁹

According to the official DoD history of POW policy and planning in Southeast Asia, in early 1969, "Intelligence, although improving, was not yet reliable enough to support possible forcible recovery efforts."³⁰ That assessment began to change in 1970 as US intelligence agencies capitalized on North Vietnam's new policy for mail and gift parcels. It was now possible to smuggle more sophisticated communications equipment and covert messages to those POWs actively communicating with encrypted letters. In addition, radios, microfilm, and micro-dots were eventually added to the POWs' inventory.

Intelligence and covert communications improved to the point that new opportunities to mount rescue operations emerged. This was particularly the case for POWs in the Son Tay, for whom a raid was mounted in November 1970. Located 22 miles northwest of Hanoi, Son Tay never held more than 55 POWs within its walls.³¹ Lt. Jg. Danny Glenn, Stock-

dale's roommate in at Hoa Lo for three months in 1967, was one of the first to be imprisoned there.

Owing to its more remote location and isolation from other camps, the POWs at Son Tay were anxious to communicate their whereabouts to US intelligence.³² Interviewed for *The Spy in the Hanoi Hilton*, Glenn confirmed that pilots who had overflown a distant mountain named Ba Vi knew its bearing (direction) from the camp. By determining the camp's direction from other locations, its geocoordinates were calculated. The information was included in coded letters sent from the camp. "Our letters were six lines, short," Glenn recalled. "You couldn't say a lot in six lines. What we were able to send out had to be broken down—divided up for different individuals to send out one or two words maybe. Then, back in Washington, it was up to them to piece it together."

The Defense Intelligence Agency informed the US Pacific Command in April 1970 that Son Tay was an operational POW camp. One POW's letter included an unusual acronym: "REQMANORSAREPKMTBAVI," which equated to "Request man or SAR east peak Mt Ba Vi."³³ Reconnaissance aircraft and overhead drones confirmed the POW's information. "When a little red drone flies over your compound at maybe 500 feet, you say, 'That's not an accident.' And so we thought they at least know we're here," Glenn reflected.³⁴

A helicopter-borne US rescue force raided the camp in November 1970, only to be disappointed. The prisoners had been relocated some time earlier. Nonetheless, as news of

the attempt reached POWs, morale soared.

Sam Johnson explained how he learned about Son Tay while eating a piece of hard candy his wife had sent him. "I plopped one in my mouth and sucked on it," he said. "I felt something stiff, like a tiny plastic sliver, stuck against the roof of my mouth. When I picked it out with my fingers, I found it to be a tiny brown speck, about the size of a pinhead." The miniscule particle opened quickly after Johnson rubbed it several times. This revealed a length of microfilm containing the front page of the *New York Times* story on Son Tay. "We knew then that our country had not forgotten us," Johnson said.³⁵

A New Day

The Son Tay raid prompted North Vietnam in December 1970 to consolidate POWs into a new section of Hoa Lo the POWs called "Unity." For most, it was the first time they had met face-to-face in North Vietnam. "It was a new day for American POWs in North Vietnam," Sam Johnson observed. "No longer separated and isolated in tiny cubicles like wild and dangerous animals, we were being allowed to live together in large groups."³⁶ Communications between prisoners and beyond proliferated. "Over the next few days, we had communications with everyone who had been shot down up to that point, something over 350 prisoners," Danny Glenn remembered.³⁷

Stockdale soon worked to restore discipline and control to the prisoners' covert communications back to the United States. A six-month let-

Radio components were also secreted in the contents of POWs' gift packages. Concealing contraband was a double-edged sword, however. The North Vietnamese routinely searched all packages.

ter-writing moratorium was imposed in 1971. In part an attempt to force improved conditions in the camp, Stockdale also needed time to create a new communication network and policies for encoded messages. "They wanted to coordinate any messages that could be sent outside the prison so that there was no mistake about the leadership's depiction of reality or what might be tried on their behalf," said Stockdale's son, James.³⁸

Stockdale directed the new network for coded messages, relying on "the master communicator" as his principal deputy. As recounted in *The Spy in the Hanoi Hilton*, the content of a message was divided into parts and conveyed to a team of writers in the prison's cellblocks. Once memorized, they were translated into encryption code and then written down to be sent in a series of sequenced letters. The system worked efficiently even when letters home were limited to six-lines six lines.

POW leadership was also centralized, leading to "... a degree of command and control that had never before been possible."³⁹ When Air Force Col. John Flynn assumed leadership as the senior ranking officer in Hoa Lo, Stockdale became his deputy for operations. Jerry Denton assisted him. "A new Pentagon Southeast Asia had been established," is how Denton described the command structure.⁴⁰ Hand in hand with improved command and control, new communication devices were being supplied.

In addition to microfilm, microdots, and 1-inch Stanhope lens readers were concealed in packages that prisoners received in 1970. Retired Air Force Col. Donald Heiliger described his experiences with microfilm (concealed in cans of Spam) and microdots (mixed into packets of powdered Kool Aid) many years later. "We had to filter our grape Kool Aid, because the microdots were the same size," he said.⁴¹

The main advantage of microdot technology was the large amount of information that could be photo-reduced to the size of a pinhead. Microdots could shrink writing on a standard sheet of typing paper to the size of an 18-point period containing some 200 to 300 words. The microdot program was one of the most closely guarded secrets in the covert-communications program.

Radio components were also secreted in the contents of POWs' gift packages. Concealing contraband was a double-edged sword, however. The North Vietnamese routinely searched all packages. If illicit items were found, a shakedown of all cells could follow—jeopardizing other covert activities.

On Christmas Day 1970, for example, a special North Vietnamese civilian intelligence team inspected all cells in Unity for any contraband delivered in parcels that had been delivered to prisoners the night before. "As we learned later," Jerry Denton said, "they apparently found a tape that had been smuggled into camp in a package of Life Savers; it con-

tained certain information from US intelligence. They also found parts of a radio receiver that a prisoner was trying to make.”⁴²

Still, some radio-communications equipment slipped past the prison’s inspectors. A radio transmitter-receiver offered the means for real-time communications, a vital capability if a prisoner’s escape plan was to have a higher chance of success. In his memoir, Sam Johnson describes how a handful of POWs at Hoa Lo awaited the remaining parts of a shortwave radio to arrive in 1971. Components were concealed in tubes of toothpaste. Finally, it was fabricated. “The unit was completely assembled, needing only a power source,” said Johnson, “when a guard discovered it during a routine inspection.”⁴³

Operation Thunderhead

For some POWs at Hoa Lo, the Son Tay rescue mission, consolidation of prisoners at Hoa Lo, and improved covert communications back to the United States fueled renewed interest in escaping, and a committee was formed. Membership on the committee varied in 1971 and 1972, but Air Force Capt. John Dramesi, Air Force Maj. James Kasler, and several others were key players. They hoarded food, articles of clothing, a signaling mirror, and other items for an “over-the-wall” escape plan called Tiger. A map was covertly delivered to them to aid in their navigation to the Red River and beyond.⁴⁴ Another small group of POWs was also planning to escape by tunneling out of Hoa Lo; their plan was called Mole.⁴⁵

Dramesi had escaped one night in May 1969 with another prisoner, Air Force Capt. Edwin Atterberry, from the prison camp at Cu Loc (the “Zoo”), only to be recaptured the next morning. Severe reprisals followed. The two escapees were viciously beaten and tortured; Atterberry died soon after. Other POWs at the Zoo also suffered savage consequences. “The disastrous escape attempt ... resulted in a final wave of havoc and brutality that again pushed many of the Northern POWs to the brink,” according to the DoD history of POWs during the war.”⁴⁶

More than 20 POWs at the prison camp were tortured for a month to obtain information on the escape; then the guards came for Red McDaniel. “I was in an impossible situation; I knew nothing about the escape attempt, and so that began my odyssey,” he reflected years later.⁴⁷ One of McDaniel’s arms was broken, and he was whipped with a knotted fan belt during a torture session spanning 14 days. Retribution was not limited to the Zoo; the effort to prevent further escapes also spread to other prison camps.

The courage and fierce determination to escape regardless of the consequences displayed by Kasler and Dramesi were unquestionable, but other POWs were highly skeptical any escape plan would work. Breaking out of a camp was less of a problem than what would follow. “I have respect for John Dramesi, a real firebrand, tough guy. I would love to see him be successful. But from my vantage point, it was almost impossible to escape from that system and make it to the coast,” McDaniel said.⁴⁸

Following the unsuccessful Dramesi-Atterberry attempt in 1969, the POWs’ senior leadership imposed a policy stipulating that no escape plan would be approved without a high likelihood of success and the assurance of outside assistance.⁴⁹

Undeterred, the Kasler-Dramesi group settled on a plan to escape from Hoa Lo, make their way to the Red River, and continue down the waterway to North Vietnam’s coast for rescue by US forces. According to Kasler’s biographers, the plan was communicated to the United States in encoded messages written by members of the escape team.⁵⁰ Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird approved the plan in January 1972.^{a,51} When the Strategic Air Command’s SR-71s signaled the plan’s approval over Hanoi on 2 and 4 May, the small group planning to escape had satisfied the SRO’s requirement for outside help.

By June, the Navy’s Seventh Fleet was in position off the coast of North Vietnam and ready to assist. USS *Grayback*, with Cdr. John Chamberlain in command, arrived on station close to the mouth of the Red River on 3 June. Lt. M. Spence Dry, the officer in charge of Alfa Platoon, SEAL Team One, and his 13 hand-picked SEALs had boarded the *Grayback* in April at the US Naval Station in Subic Bay, Philippines. Seven members of Underwater Demolition Team Eleven were also assigned to the submarine to operate its four “SEAL delivery vehicles” (SDVs)—small, free-flooding, unpressurized mini-submarines.⁵²

a. Veith also states, “The Escape Committee, according to Dramesi, had set up a separate channel [for communications] outside the one normally used by the POWs.”



In the spring of 1972, the USS *Grayback* (LPSS-574) (top) a submarine designed to carry special operations troops, was deployed with a detachment of SEALs to the coast of North Vietnam, where they were to attempt to rescue POWs who had communicated a plan to escape. The SEAL's platoon commander, Lt. M. Spence Dry—shown above explaining their mission—was killed in the operation, which, in any event, would not have located any POWs because, unknown to local commanders, an escape attempt would not be made. Official DoD photos; lower photo by Timothy R. Reeves.

Two Navy combat search-and-rescue HH-3A helicopters assigned to Helicopter Combat Support Squadron Seven, Detachment 110 (HC-7 Det 110), were assigned to fly aerial-surveillance missions along a specific area of coastline off the Red River's delta region to search for escaping POWs. Several Seventh Fleet ships operating in the Tonkin Gulf, including the nuclear-powered, guided-missile cruiser USS *Long Beach* (CGN-9), were designated to provide command-and-control functions and other support as necessary. Detailed information about the specific purpose of their assignments was limited to a handful of people to protect operational security.

Misfortune and technical problems with two SDVs plagued the small SEAL platoon from the start. During a night reconnaissance mission on 3 June, the batteries on Dry's SDV were exhausted as the craft battled a strong current. Unable to locate the submarine, the SDV was scuttled. Dry and his three companions treaded water until rescued the next morning by one of the HH-3A helicopters assigned to the mission and were taken to the *Long Beach*. Problems also developed when the four men were flown by helicopter from the cruiser that night for a low-level "cast" (i.e., jump) to return to *Grayback*.

The pilots of the helicopter experienced great difficulty in identifying the submarine's infra-red signaling light. Then, when they thought they had detected the signal, the aircraft commander was unable to maneuver the helicopter properly during his approach for the drop. The pilot called for the men to drop well in excess of the maximum limits of 20 feet of altitude and 20 knots of airspeed.

Operation Thunderhead was now history, but POW covert communications continued until the end of hostilities between the United States and North Vietnam early in 1973.

Dry's last words before leaping into the darkness were, "We've got to get back to the *Grayback*." He was killed instantly when he hit the water; one of the UDT operators of the SDV was seriously injured. The survivors retrieved Dry's lifeless body and again treaded water overnight.

Several hours before this mishap, *Grayback* had launched a second SDV. Improperly ballasted, it foundered and sank in 60 feet of water. The SDV's team surfaced safely and they soon joined the men from Dry's SDV. They were all rescued by a Det 110 helicopter at dawn and taken to the *Long Beach*. Dry's body and the seriously injured UDT operator were flown to the aircraft carrier USS *Kitty Hawk* (CV-63).

The *Grayback* continued its surveillance. Commander Chamberlain was confident the SEAL platoon would be able to perform its mission with the submarine's two remaining SDVs. Helicopter surveillance continued along North Vietnam's coast. Finally, in late June, with no POW sightings reported, Operation Thunderhead was terminated.

No sightings were possible because no POWs attempted the escape from Hoa Lo. In May, following the SR-71 flyovers, the two groups planning to escape requested permission to do so from Colonel Flynn, the camp's SRO. After consulting with other senior POWs (including Stockdale) in the POW leadership chain, the requests were not approved. As historian George J. Veith concluded, "It was too risky, and the possible NVA retaliation on the remaining

POWs would disrupt their hard-won and newly formed communication systems."⁵³ Veith noted that both Dramesi and Kasler were furious but obeyed orders. Unfortunately, POW leaders were unable to communicate the decision in time to abort the rescue mission.

Operation Thunderhead became history, but POW covert communications continued until the end of hostilities between the United States and North Vietnam early in 1973. At the end of 1972, radio-communications equipment covertly delivered to Hoa Lo achieved a milestone of sorts. During the joint Seventh Fleet Air Force-Navy Task Force 77 "Christmas bombing" offensive against North Vietnam in late December (Operation Linebacker II), North Vietnam claimed that B-52s had hit the prison. The United States was able to refute the spurious allegation authoritatively. POWs transmitted a radio message from Hoa Lo to US reconnaissance aircraft in Morse code: "V LIE WE OK."⁵⁴

The following month, after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in January, 591 POWs came home from the north and south of Vietnam to the United States between February and April during Operation Homecoming.

Epilogue: "You Saved Our Lives"

President Ford awarded Admiral Stockdale the Medal of Honor in March 1976 for "conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty"

for his leadership of POW resistance to interrogation and propaganda exploitation. A great many of his fellow POWs were also highly decorated for their heroism, leadership, and sacrifices during captivity.

John Dramesi remains adamant that a POW's principal duty is to escape in accordance with Article III of the US military's Code of Conduct. It states, in part, "I will make every effort to escape and to aid others to escape." Article IV, however, states, in part, "I will give no information or take part in any action which might be harmful to my comrades."

In the face of these two potentially conflicting provisions, it unavoidably falls on the shoulders of the POWs' senior ranking officer to assess and balance the likelihood an escape plan will be successful with the probable consequences an attempted escape will have on other POWs. One pilot imprisoned at Hoa Lo, a veteran of WW II and Korea who was captured in June 1965, described the odds for successfully escaping as "a big, fat zero."⁵⁵ Clearly, the horrific retribution that followed the Dramesi-Atterberry escape in 1969 weighed heavily on the minds of Hoa Lo's senior POW leaders when the SRO disapproved any escape attempt in May 1972.

There is no doubt, however, about the POWs' admiration for those who provided the means for them to communicate during their years of captivity and for those who attempted to rescue them at Son Tay and during Operation Thunderhead.

In February 2008, Rear Adm. Joseph D. Kernan, commander of the Naval Special Warfare Command, posthumously awarded Lieutenant

Dry a Bronze Star with Combat V Distinguishing Device for his “heroic achievement” during Operation Thunderhead. It was presented to his family during a ceremony at the Naval Academy. Col. John Drame-si was present, along with several SEALs from Dry’s platoon, a number of Dry’s Naval Academy classmates (including Adm. Michael G. Mullen, then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff), and members of the Brigade of Midshipmen. “I’ve been looking forward to this day for a long time,” Drame-si said.⁵⁶

The POW community also expressed its gratitude to CIA’s David Coffey for his inspired efforts to support them in captivity. Many volumes in Coffey’s large collection of books written by former POWs are inscribed with notes of thanks. One says, “You saved our lives.” Another says, “We could have never endured without you.” Another one says, “Thanks for the groceries.” Coffey regularly attended POW events, was made an honorary POW, and became friends with a number of the former prisoners.⁵⁷

“Over the time that I worked at night on the project,” Coffey said, “I had the deeply satisfying personal pleasure of seeing how grateful the military was that they had this channel. For years, it had been unknown what happened to many of the guys, whether they were KIA or MIA or POWs. After we had the communications link, not only did the military know, but a lot of these families also began to get reliable information about their sons, fathers, and husbands.”^{a, 58}

a. In 1997, in connection with CIA’s celebration of its 50th anniversary, David E.

“This represents one of those cases where a unique capability within the CIA was used not only for national intelligence purposes . . . but in a very tactical way to support people who were not only in harm’s way, but were actually [being] harmed.”

Asked to describe what the CIA’s covert efforts to assist POWs during the Vietnam War represented to the prisoners themselves, Robert Wallace replied, “This represents one of those cases where a unique capability within the CIA was used not only for national intelligence purposes in the sense of strategic intelligence, but in a very tactical way to support people who were not only in harm’s way, but were actually [being] harmed.”⁵⁹ In Wallace’s mind, scores—if not hundreds—of POWs were able to survive as a result.



Coffey was named a CIA Trailblazer. His citation on cia.gov reads: “Mr. Coffey’s exceptional ability to solve operational problems with technology culminated in his successful creation and maintenance of an extremely sensitive covert communications capability. His leadership significantly enhanced the integration of technical support into espionage operations.” (<http://www.internet2.cia/news-information/press-releases-statements/press-release-archive-1997-1/trailblazers.html>) David E. Coffey died in April 2008.

Endnotes

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20. *In Love and War*, 215.
21. Alvin Townley, *Defiant* (Thomas Dunne Books, 2014), 205.
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The images of the Hoa Lo and Son Tay prisons and the POW holding a letter from home can all be found in NARA 342B-VN-117, Filed: Air Force Activities (Vietnam) Prisons and Prisoners.



