Art Cormier, Neil Black, and Bill Robinson showed excellence in the POW camps around Hanoi.

In 1967, there was a "unit" of approximately 300 Americans fighting the Vietnam War from within a Hanoi prison. The unit—later named the 4th Allied POW Wing—was located in the drab North Vietnamese capital. Within this unit, every man had the same job: prisoner of war.

All—except three enlisted airmen—were officers, including me. Our job description was to continue fighting for the United States while imprisoned.

The three enlisted airmen were SSgt. Arthur Cormier, Amn. Arthur Neil Black, and SSgt. William A. Robinson. All were crewmen on helicopters that rescued aircrews from downed aircraft. The three were shot down in 1965.

They were captured, taken prisoner, and ended up in the Hoa Lo prison in Hanoi (the "Hanoi Hilton," in POW parlance).

POWs were dressed in pajamas, and were usually disheveled as a result of infrequent chances to bathe or shave. Given only two daily meals, and those of poor nutritional value, the POWs were thin. Under these conditions, enlisted men, officers, Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps all looked about the same.

A general rule, though with multiple exceptions, was that the higher ranking a prisoner was, the more torture he suffered. Art Cormier, Neil Black, and Bill Robinson were among the exceptions. They were tortured like the officer POWs.

A Daring Escape

An idea to do the "right thing"—in the absence of knowledge of specific regulations or rules—was hatched in early 1968.

At that time, the POW officers decided to commission the three enlisted POWs, Cormier, Black, and Robinson. Why? The commissioned men saw these three enlisted men show exceptional heroic qualities.

Until late 1969, most prisoners lived in solitary confinement or in small cells with one or two other POWs. The rules were simple: no noise from any cell. If a prisoner was caught trying to communicate with a POW in the next cell, through the concrete walls, he received a beating—or more.

Most of our torture was for propaganda. The North Vietnamese wanted us to write or make a statement of confession condemning the war. They thrived on the growing anti-war sentiment in the United States, and felt statements from POWs would support that movement.

The North Vietnamese put us in solitary because they believed in the divide-and-conquer theory. They believed that if they could isolate us, they could prevent us from communicating.

Both they and we knew that if the prisoners could communicate, we could organize. If we could organize, we could resist—or at least resist better.

The POWs lived in these conditions until early 1969. Then, some of us were moved into an area that we named the

Commissioned in Hanoi

By Leo K. Thorsness

"Annex." It was part of the POW camp called the "Zoo," located a couple of miles southwest of the Hanoi Hilton. The Annex had larger cells holding up to about 10 POWs.

The cells had a high-walled tiny outside area where we could spend a few minutes on most days.

It was from the Annex that Capt. John A. Dramesi and Capt. Edwin L. Atterberry escaped on May 10, 1969. John and Ed escaped through the roof of the cell in which they lived with several others. They made it over the prison wall.

At daybreak the next day, they could find no cover and were spotted and recaptured. Atterberry was subsequently tortured to death, while Dramesi survived months of torture.

Following that escape, the POWs were taken back into the small Zoo cells. The systematic and horrendous torture that followed was long-lasting and as severe as any we experienced the entire time we all served as POWs.

Above: An exterior wall at the infamous "Hanoi Hilton" prisoner of war camp in North Vietnam. Below: Just-released POWs celebrate as they leave North Vietnamese airspace aboard a C-141 Starlifter. They would soon be repatriated to the US.

Arthur Cormier is embraced by fellow pararescuemen on his arrival at Scott AFB, Ill., after more than seven years as a POW in North Vietnam.

This was the environment that the officers and enlisted men endured. We served our country and endured torture to our best ability. Over time, we strengthened our solidarity and, in our way, showed leadership in battle.

Our collective memory fades, but it is agreed that the idea to commission the enlisted airmen germinated in Annex cell #3, which held 12 men—eight Air Force and four Navy.

The five Air Force officers were Darrel E. Pyle, Harry D. Monlux, Michael L. Brazelton, Ralph "Tom" Browning, and John L. Borling. The Naval officers were Richard M. Brunhaver, David J. Carey, Read B. Mecleary, and James B. Bailey. All were O-2s when they were captured. The Air Force enlisted men were there as well.

By date of rank, Skip Brunhaver was the SRO, or senior ranking officer.

Once the commissioning idea was hatched, it consumed a lot of time—but having a new subject to discuss was refreshing. When the same men are together in the same cell 24 hours a day with no pencils, papers, or books, new subjects are welcome.

All men enthusiastically joined in. The three enlisted airmen found all of this interesting, but appropriately held back from offering opinions.

Conversation often centered on "could it be done?"

A frequent question was, "Skip, what do you think—you are the SRO." Of the nine officers in the cell, Borling and Browning were Air Force Academy graduates, and Carey and Mecleary were Naval Academy graduates.

Brunhaver generally responded with something like, "How in the world do I know? You, John, and Tom are the Air Force graduates. Did you flunk the battlefield commission course?" Brunhaver was never shy when expressing his opinion.

Battlefield Commissions

Borling and Browning did not think the Air Force had had experience or regulations covering battlefield commissions. The Air Force had become a separate service in 1947 and there were no opportunities in Korea for enlisted airmen to receive a battlefield commission. Until Vietnam, the subject simply never came up in the Air Force.

As the conversation heated up, Borling and Browning would turn to Carey and Mecleary, their Annapolis counterparts, saying, "The Marines fall under the Navy. Marines have had a lot of battlefield commissions. What do your regulations say?"

Carey once tried to hoodwink the Air Force members. He said, "I recall in our plebe year, we had a course titled 'History of Battlefield Commissions in Blood and Guts Eyeball Warfare,' " adding that "it was covered under Naval Regulation 291-41-3A." Carey said it confidently, with a straight face. He turned aside to avoid looking at anyone and then, as if talking to himself, added, "Yes, the more I think about it, I'm sure that was the regulation."

At best he was believed for maybe 25 seconds before he turned back to the troops with a big grin.

One topic we discussed was whether, if the prisoners went through with their plan, the North Vietnamese would find out that Cormier, Black, and Robinson had become officers. If they found out, would the former enlisted men be tortured more?

This was one time all three enlisted men spoke up, saying, "We have been tortured already; we have nothing to lose."

After a week of conversation, Brunhaver declared that it was time to decide: "I would like your vote up or down to promote Art, Neil, and Bill to second lieutenants."

Without hesitation, the other eight officers raised their hands high. Brunhaver looked at Cormier, Black, and Robinson, who felt it was not their position to vote about a battlefield commission for themselves. Brunhaver didn't accept their deference, and sharply said, "Men, do I get the impression you don't want to be officers?"

When the three of them realized that Brunhaver truly wanted to know how they felt about being promoted to second lieutenant, the hands of all three shot up.

Brunhaver, as cell SRO, decided it was time to run the commissioning idea by the Annex's ranking officer, Capt. Konrad W. Trautman. There was a problem, however: how to contact him. In buildings with a common wall—and with time and a rusty nail—a small hole could be drilled from one cell into the next. Drilling a pencil-sized hole took time, but time was something the POWs had plenty of, and the hole could be covered or disguised when not used.

Cells without adjoining walls posed another problem. Fortunately, in the first few days we were in the Annex, we discovered that we could toss a stone from one courtyard to the next.

Tossing a stone with note attached significantly increased the risk of being caught, however.

Bits of red tile roof, ground into powder and mixed with water, can make a faint ink. Blood makes a bold ink, and under the circumstances the POWs were willing to do whatever it took.

Generally, something could be found to write on. Our toilet paper, for example, was large (squares were about 15 inches across), very coarse, and tan-colored. Parts of the sheets were thick and parts had holes; sometimes small wood fibers were embedded in the papers.

It Won't Hurt To Try

We carefully tore the sheets into squares of about three-and-a-half by three-and-a-half inches. We did not get much toilet paper, and even if paper was used for a secret note, the receiver recycled it back into toilet paper.

A cryptic note was written, asking for permission to commission Cormier, Black, and Robinson. It was rolled tightly and pushed though a hole from cell #3 to cell #4. This was big news to the POWs in cell #4.

Once cell #4 had it, they glued the note with rice paste to a stone, and airmailed (threw) the note from Yard 4 to Yard 5, where Trautman was imprisoned. He consulted his "staff of eight officers" in cell #5, and, with little discussion, the decision was unanimous.

Trautman returned his answer—"Yes, commission Art, Neil, and Bill"—by airmail to cell #4 and back through the wall hole to cell #3.

The bottom line in all conversations about promoting Cormier, Black, and Robinson from enlisted to officers boiled down to: "It won't hurt to try. The Air Force can sort it out when we get home." Basic to all conversations, however, was the quality of the three enlisted men. All had "kept the faith" in America during four long and brutal years, from 1965 to 1969. All had withstood individual torture, kept their integrity, and served honorably in terrible living conditions with inadequate food. Despite all of this, they had kept their dignity intact.

We saw firsthand that these men exhibited heroic qualities in our daily POW battlefield.

With Annex SRO Trautman granting his approval, the day arrived. Although it had been several years since any officers had been sworn in, they collectively reconstructed the oath.

All remembered that you repeat your name and swear to defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, and take on the obligations without reservation. So help me God.

The oath that was administered was not perfect, but it was close enough under the circumstances.

Never had the oath been taken more seriously—nor, likely, taken in prison pajamas. Cormier, Black, and Robinson each repeated the oath standing at attention and proud. It was a solemn, memorable occasion.

Left: Neil Black salutes Maj. Gen. John Gonge (center) and Maj. Gen. Daniel James Jr. (l) on his arrival at Travis AFB, Calif. Above: William Robinson salutes the colors when he disembarks from the C-141.

After commissioning, the officers created an "in-cell Officer Candidate School." Cormier, Black, and Robinson gladly attended, took instructions seriously, and were on their way to becoming fine officers. The courses were taught by the Air Force and

Naval Academy graduates, with the other officers helping out.

Then came the failed Son Tay raid of Nov. 20, 1970. Son Tay was about 23 miles west of Hanoi. The raid was perfectly executed, but when the American rescue troops landed in the POW camp there, the prisoners had already been moved.

Indirectly, however, the mission was a success. The North Vietnamese realized we could be rescued and they moved the prisoners into large cells in the Hanoi Hilton. Treatment started to improve, and living with up to 45 POWs in one cell was a much better arrangement.

Once in the Hilton, we settled into a routine. We now were allowed to talk out loud, and some of the barred windows were not bricked up, meaning we could see the sky.

With between 15 to 45 POWs in a cell, there was a lot of knowledge available, and we began to inventory who knew the most about subjects.

Eventually the POW with the most knowledge about a subject, if willing, began to teach, although it was hard to teach certain subjects like math without pencils or paper.

The last year we were held prisoner, we began to receive some medicine. We really didn't know what ailments the bottle of blue medicine treated, but it was great ink. If we got ahead and had extra toilet paper, with a bamboo pen and blue medicine, we could make class notes.

When the guards found these notes they typically destroyed them, but sometimes they did not mind us having a few math notes or Spanish vocabulary word lists.

At the Hilton—also called Camp Unity by the POWs—the O-5 and O-6 rank prisoners were kept separate from the more junior officers. Col. John P. Flynn was the ranking POW in Unity, and occasionally we were able to get a note to or from him at a "note drop" (small crack) at a common toilet. The toilet itself was, of course, a squat-over-the-hole model.

We were able to tell Flynn about the commissioning ceremony for Cormier, Black, and Robinson, and in his return note he enthusiastically approved.

Flynn made it a personal priority to make the commissions official when he got back to the United States. He also directed the academy graduates to teach a three month "officer" program to Cormier, Black, and Robinson. The word spread throughout Unity, so that whatever cells they were moved to, their training would follow.

The courses centered on leadership, management, motivation techniques, character development, command decision-making, and one combined course on supply and logistics. It was surprising how many POWs, officers all, listened in while the courses were being taught to the new second lieutenants.

President Nixon sent the B-52s—finally—over Hanoi in December 1972. The bombers came, wave after wave and night after night. The bombing started Dec. 18, and the B-52s, supported by F-105 Wild Weasels and F-4 Phantoms, came every night, except Christmas night, until Dec. 29.

The B-52s were allowed to drop their bombs within 2,000 feet of the Hanoi Hilton. When a string of 72 bombs goes off within 2,000 feet of you, it makes thunderous noise. The plaster falling off the cell ceiling was another good signal, as was seeing SAMs streak into the sky, and hearing the flak from every direction and the sound of many B-52 engines—first in the distance, then slowly getting louder. Combining the visual, audio, and "feel" senses together was the most wonderful experience for the POWs—we had waited years for it to happen.

Forced to the Table

This massive show of strength forced the North Vietnamese to go back to the bargaining table in Paris. Twenty-nine days after the final bomb, on Jan. 27, 1973, Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho signed the Paris Peace Accords, officially ending the Vietnam War.

POWs were released in four groups, one group about every 15 days starting in February 1973. The longest-held prisoners were released first. That group included the three new second lieutenants.

After our release, Flynn, by then a brigadier general, and Admiral James B. Stockdale, a former POW, joined forces to push for official recognition of the battlefield commissions that Art Cormier, Neil Black, and Bill Robinson had received. (Cormier asked that his commission be delayed until he was promoted to chief master sergeant.)

Flynn and Stockdale wrote a document explaining the rationale, process, and training for the battlefield commissions. They gave their strongest recommendation that the Hanoi commissioning of Cormier, Black, and Robinson be accepted.

Initially, Flynn and Stockdale took their request to the Air Force, since the three enlisted men were all airmen. On first contact, there was resistance by the Air Force because there were no regulations or precedents for USAF battlefield commissions.

Stockdale then unofficially talked to the Navy which, of course, had regulations and ample precedents involving both the Navy and Marine Corps. Soon the Air Force figured a way to be on board, and the battlefield commissions moved up the line. They were accepted and approved through the Secretary of Defense. The Defense Secretary decided, however, to take the request to the White House for final approval.

Nixon was briefed on the 1969 battlefield commissions in the Annex prison in North Vietnam for the three outstanding enlisted men. It was reliably reported Nixon's response to the commissioning request was, "Hell, yes!"

The promotion date was slipped from 1969 to the date of final approval, which was April 9, 1973. Flynn and Col. Fred V. Cherry, outstanding POWs both, administered the oaths of office at Andrews AFB, Md.

After the war, Black, Cormier, and Robinson demonstrated exemplary service as officers. Cormier and Robinson focused on support and maintenance duties. Black went to pilot training and spent many years as a rated officer. All three served honorably with distinction after prison, as they had while they were POWs. Cormier and Robinson retired as captains, while Black retired as a major.

Commissioning the three enlisted POWs in prison was one of the few positive events during those long years. It was the right thing to do for them, and it was the right thing for all of us, even though no one official was looking. We were cut off from our country, our military branches, and our homes. We didn't know how our lives would turn out, but we were—and are—proud to have lived this experience while serving our country during those extraordinarily difficult times. ■

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