

Courage in Captivity

By Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)

Editor's note: Maj Bevilacqua, a longtime contributing author for Leatherneck, recently passed away (see obit on page 66) at the age of 91. Leatherneck is republishing "Courage in Captivity" in honor of our friend and his gift for storytelling as well as his service in Korea and Vietnam.



TSGT ROLAND E. ARMSTRONG, USMC

Col Albert D. Metz, USMC, a World War II prisoner of war, commanded the United Nations Musan-ni Provisional Command and ensured his staff, including doctors, nurses, and support personnel were ready for returning prisoners in all physical and psychological conditions.

"I was extremely proud of the conduct of U.S. Marine Corps personnel with whom I came in contact during my period of confinement. Their esprit de corps was perhaps the highest of any branch of the Armed Forces of the United States during this period."

—LtCol Gerald Brown, USAF
Senior prisoner, Camps 2 and 5

By dawn on Friday, March 27, 1953, Combat Outpost Reno had fallen. The reinforced platoon of Marines holding the exposed position had been inundated by a multi-battalion Chinese assault, and Second Lieutenant Rufus A. "Al" Seymour, one of only five Marines

left alive on the battered hillside, was being marched into captivity by a bayonet-wielding Chinese soldier.

If the tall, rangy Seymour thought about it, the Georgian may have been struck by the irony of the situation. Little more than a year before, Al Seymour, then a corporal, had been standing cellblock watches at the Camp Lejeune, N.C., brig. Now he was a prisoner himself, one of 221 Marines who would endure communist captivity during the course of the Korean War.

Like Al Seymour, the majority of those Marines, 190 of them, were ground Marines, most of whom had been physically overwhelmed by sheer weight of numbers. The remaining 31 were aviators who had



been shot down in communist-controlled territory and captured almost immediately. Some would endure captivity for the better part of three years, while others would be released after only a few weeks. All would suffer barbaric treatment that was consciously designed to weaken them physically and break them mentally.

The war did not end for these men with their capture. They would continue to fight on by other means, resisting the efforts of their captors to break their spirits and use them as propaganda tools. The fighting in the Korean War was not limited to the



TSGT ROLANDE, ARMSTRONG, USMC

front lines; it continued in the prison camps where brave men matched their wills with those of their enemy.

Those camps were not pleasant places. Located in remote regions of North Korea and many in the far north near the Yalu River, they were all but impossible to escape from. Even if escape were possible, an escaped prisoner of European or African descent would stand no chance of remaining undetected in an Asian population. He would be faced with having to traverse hundreds of miles of hostile territory before nearing friendly lines.

There was only one choice and that was to endure.

That endurance began at the moment of capture. Among Marine prisoners there were few, very few, who had been taken prisoner after laying down their weapons and raising their hands. Most had become prisoners after being wounded or unconscious and unable to resist, while others had been physically overpowered and clubbed senseless. As one former prisoner put it, "You fought until they reached you with a bullet or a rifle butt. ... That was the end."

Ambulance loads of returning prisoners traveled the 15 miles south from the Panmunjom exchange point to Freedom Village to be met by medical personnel, senior civilian and military UN officials, and hordes of waiting newsmen, photographers, and well-wishers.

Capture may have been the end of combat, but it was only the beginning of captivity. The first stage of that captivity was quick removal from the combat zone and transfer to a prison camp. It also was the first, the best and usually the last

North Korean prisoners are marched through the streets of Inchon to the prison compound, Sept. 18, 1950.



opportunity to escape. It is doctrinally accepted that the best chance for escape is as soon after capture as possible. This tenet was borne out by Marines who had the misfortune of being taken prisoner in Korea. With one exception, the only successful escapes were those made in the first days or weeks after capture. If a prisoner was going to get away, he had better do it quickly.

Knowing this, the North Koreans and Chinese wasted no time in removing newly captured prisoners from the combat zone and starting them on their way to prison camps. How did prisoners get to those camps? By forced march, mostly at night and in whatever weather the season offered. Rations were scarce and skimpy. Beatings and clubbing with rifle butts were dealt out much more liberally than rations.

No special consideration was accorded the weak or the wounded. They kept up as best they could, helped along by comrades or perishing by the roadside when their captors refused to allow anyone to help them. Some were shot. Others were beaten to death. Any healthy prisoner who at-

tempted to interfere could expect at best a severe beating.

Movement to the prison camps during the winter was a particularly harsh ordeal. In bitter cold driven straight from Siberia by arctic wind, wearing nothing but the clothes they had been captured in, subsisting on only a handful of food daily and denied even the most rudimentary shelter, prisoners suffered terribly. More than a few in each group died of malnutrition, exposure, untreated wounds and pneumonia. Some were hastily buried alongside the road in unmarked graves. Others were left to lie where they had fallen.

Depending upon where a man was captured, the trek to a permanent prison camp could take four or five days or several weeks. With a few notable exceptions, these camps were located along a 75-mile segment of the south bank of the Yalu River separating Korea from Manchuria. For the most part they had been small villages from which the unfortunate inhabitants had been unceremoniously evicted and sent off to shift for themselves in the bleak, barren countryside. The little

clusters of thatch-roofed houses then were ringed with barbed wire and guard towers, and prisoners were herded in. Then the real ordeal began.

Under the Chinese, that ordeal took the form of a savage, relentless assault on the spirit, will and mind, all designed to turn the prisoner against his very ideals and mold him into a propaganda tool. Every attempt was made to destroy a prisoner's allegiance to his country and his service, to break down unit cohesion and pride, to sever the prisoner from the strength of unity with his fellow captives and reduce him to a helpless individual who would respond favorably to the dictates of his captors. The goal was to create in each prisoner a sense of isolation, helplessness and hopelessness in order to make him ripe for communist indoctrination.

This indoctrination was constant and never ending. Prisoners were bombarded by lectures extolling the virtues of communism and the evils of capitalism. Political indoctrination in Marxist theory went on daily, force-fed to prisoners by English-speaking commissars, and woe to the weary prisoner who nodded off.



MARINE CORPS ARCHIVES & SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

Indoctrination and interrogation went hand in hand, one often masking the other in an all-out assault on the senses until the prisoner's mind reeled under the constant drumbeat. Prisoners were graded and classified as "progressive," those who at least appeared cooperative, or "reactionary," those who resisted.

Progressives were rewarded with slightly better treatment and rations. Reactionaries were punished. A favorite punishment was "the hole." Every camp had its hole, a cramped, shallow pit with insufficient room to either stand up or lie down. A prisoner confined in a vermin-infested hole foul with his own waste and that of previous occupants had to sit or crouch for days and nights on end, his only shelter from the elements the cross-barred lattice that sealed him in his living tomb.

Captain Gerald Fink, a pilot with Marine Fighter Squadron (VMF) 312, was immediately remanded to the hole for his defiant answer to an interrogator's question of why he had come to Korea: "To kill communists." Another rugged resister with a record as an outspoken reactionary, 2ndLt Roland L. McDaniel,

Below: After medical examinations, former prisoners were allowed to tell their stories to reporters if they wished to do so. Sgt Robert J. Coffee (with the tag attached to his blouse), a former POW, was interviewed by a *Leatherneck* staff correspondent.



TSGT ROLAND E. ARMSTRONG, USMC

an artilleryman of 11th Marine Regiment, spent 10 days in the hole bound to a South Korean prisoner. When he emerged, he had pneumonia and tuberculosis.

Sickness was not reserved to occupants of the hole. It was endemic throughout the camps. Take a starvation diet of partially cooked rice, moldy beans, millet or boiled corn in quantities barely sufficient to sustain life, complicate it by near-constant exposure to the elements, and what you get is sickness run wild. Pneumonia, dysentery, respiratory infections and malnutrition were only too common. So, too, were vitamin-deficiency diseases that had been all but eradicated in America years before: beriberi, pellagra, rickets. The resulting death rate of 20 to 30 a day was predictable.

Only sickness in its near-death phase excused a prisoner from the daily indoctrination sessions. These went on and on and on, over and over and over. Malnourished and exhausted prisoners learned more of Karl Marx, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, Mao Tse-tung and the superiority of communism than they ever wanted to know. Wanting only something to eat and a warm, dry place to lie down, they were forced to participate in "self-criticism" round tables. It never stopped. For those who weren't properly attentive there was the hole.

In the case of certain selected prisoners there was, in addition to indoctrination, a relentless attempt to extract "confessions"

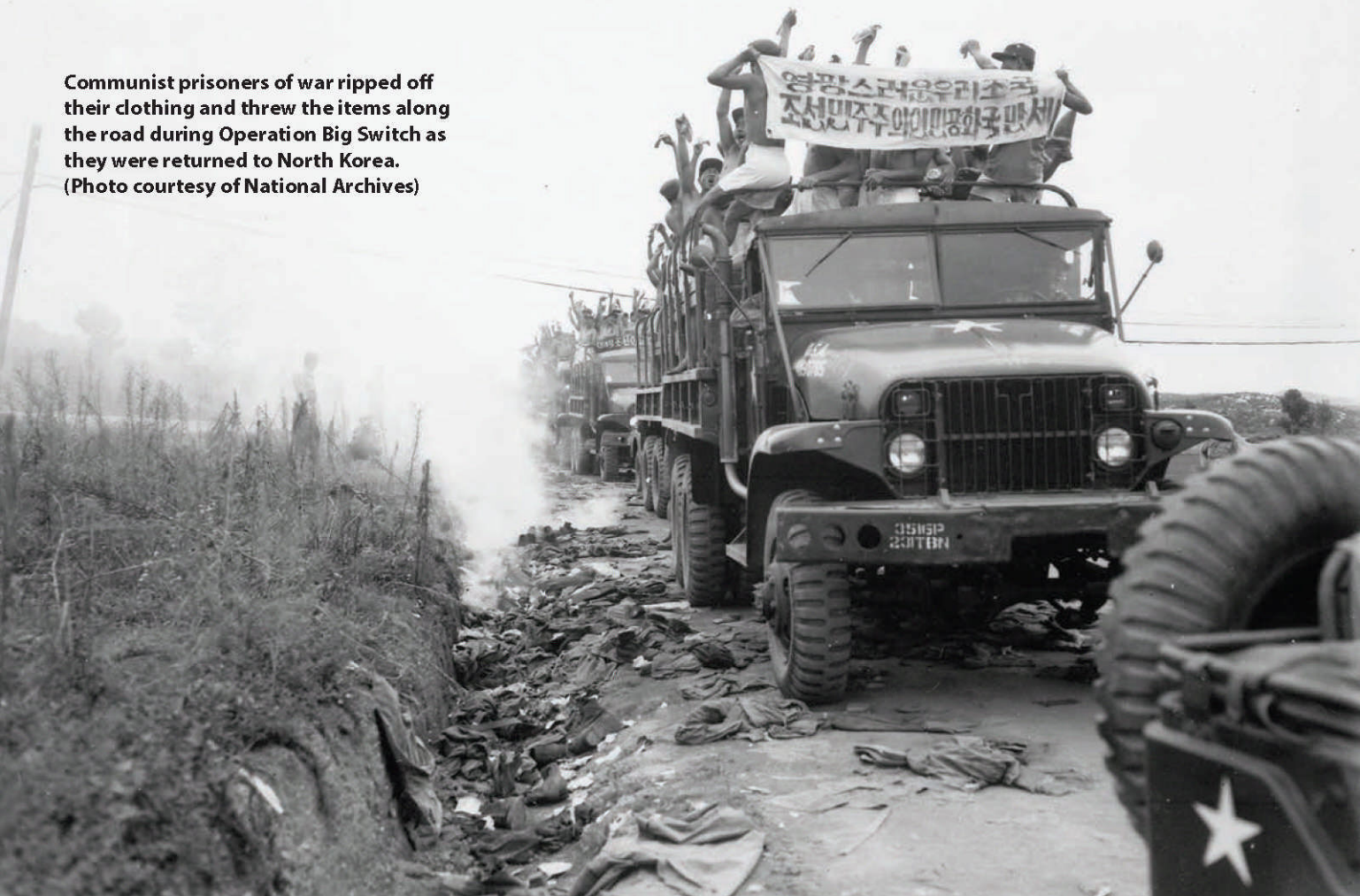
to "war crimes" and the conduct of "germ warfare." Aviators and medical personnel were particularly singled out for this treatment, subjected to hour after hour of demands to write a detailed confession of how they had employed bacteriological agents against unarmed Korean civilians.

Hospital Corpsman Third Class Billy R. Penn was kept awake for four days, kept from sleeping by kicks and blows from rifle butts, subsisting on a handful of rice each day. When he failed to break under this particular form of barbarism, he was subjected to two weeks of firing squads, another favorite form of mental torture. Every day he would be taken out into an open field where a squad of Chinese soldiers would go through all the drill of executing him, only the click of hammers on empty chambers differentiating the procedure from the real thing. Every now and then a live round was fired past him, letting him know that the next time could be the real thing. Penn didn't break.

Neither did his fellow Marine prisoners. Confronted by mistreatment and brutality on a monumental scale, they resisted through the basic instinct of remembering that they were Marines and silently vowing to never give in. They drew strength from pride in their Corps and learning to take each day in turn. They would not allow their captors to break them. They would persevere.

Slowly, surreptitiously, leaders emerged, and a network of resistance was fashioned.

Communist prisoners of war ripped off their clothing and threw the items along the road during Operation Big Switch as they were returned to North Korea. (Photo courtesy of National Archives)



Two of the best known of these resistance leaders were Lieutenant Colonel (later Lieutenant General) William G. Thrash, a pilot with Marine Attack Squadron (VMA) 121, and Major (later LtGen) John N. McLaughlin of the 1st Marine Division headquarters. Held in separate camps, LtCol Thrash and Maj McLaughlin lost no time in setting up clandestine prisoner organizations to thwart Chinese indoctrination. Each man was identified by the Chinese as an unregenerate reactionary and suffered severe punishment. Both men endured beatings and months in solitary confinement. Both continued to be pillars of resistance for their fellow prisoners.

Other Marines were no less heroic. Capt Fink, whose scathing retort to his interrogators had him cast into the hole almost immediately after his capture, was from first to last a thorn in the side of his captors. Despite being subjected to unspeakable humiliations, he never wavered, never compromised.

When he wasn't annoying his jailers, Capt Fink was aiding his fellow prisoners. Using odds and ends of whatever material he could come by, he fashioned a remark-

ably effective prosthetic leg for Air Force Maj Thomas D. Harrison, who had lost a leg when he was shot down. Using resonant wood and tubing stolen from the Chinese, Fink crafted stethoscopes for POW doctors. His most enduring artifact, a 22-inch crucifix christened "Christ in Barbed Wire," stands today in Father Kapaun High School in Wichita, Kan. It got Capt Fink

10 days in the hole, from which he emerged as pugnacious as ever. Gerald Fink never broke.

Neither did Master Sergeant John T. Cain, one of the Marine Corps' best-known enlisted pilots, who played his own mind games with the Chinese, describing in great detail for his interrogators the organization and mission of the "Fleet Logistics Wing," a completely imaginary unit. For his refusal to reveal any significant information, and perhaps in repayment for the chagrin of his interrogators at

being duped, MSgt Cain was put before a "firing squad" in the same manner as HM3 Penn. That failed to produce the desired response. Neither did 84 days of never-ending interrogation. Eventually, the Chinese just gave up on MSgt Cain.

Imagination, ingenuity, the will to en-

sure, pride in their Corps and unity with their fellow Marines were the qualities that carried them. Despite the never-ending efforts of the Chinese to stifle them, clandestine organizations carried on their work of developing cohesion and providing individual Marines with the strength of the group.

Anyone who knows Marines cannot be surprised at the ingenuity and, yes, craftiness displayed by the ones who endured captivity by the Chinese. To lift the spirits of his fellow prisoners, First Lieutenant Robert J. Gillette wrote a full-length humorous novel on toilet paper. Circulated through the camp, the story provided rare moments of levity among men faced with nothing but bleakness.

In every camp, imprisoned Marines found means to communicate with one another. As a means of exchanging information, notes were hidden under rocks near bathing points and field sanitation facilities. Information was passed orally between groups on working details. Prisoners on kitchen details baked notes into bread. Stones arranged in special fashions transmitted messages. Beyond being a means of transmitting information, these devices contributed to morale. They were the means by which a captive could thumb his nose at his captors.

At times, that nose thumbing could



Prisoner of War Medal

be blatant. In 1952, Marine prisoners at Camp 2 celebrated the Marine Corps Birthday with a suitably decorated cake fashioned from stolen ingredients and by toasting the President of the United States and the Commandant of the Marine Corps with stolen rice wine. The observance ended with a spirited singing of “The Star-Spangled Banner” and “The Marines’ Hymn.” An invited guest, Quartermaster Sergeant James Day, Royal Marines, was struck by the manner in which “the small band of USMC should be able to get together and do this sort of thing quite seriously, quite sincerely and with no thought of any consequence.”

With no thought of any consequence. Those words sum up the conduct of Marines behind barbed wire during the Korean War. At whatever cost to themselves, they kept the faith with their country, with their Corps, and with each other. In the face of an implacable enemy, they stood fast and firm, unbreakable and unbroken. They were Marines, and that was what Marines did. To do any less was unthinkable.

Eventually, they came back. In late March 1953, in an entirely unexpected development, the North Korean and Chinese communists agreed to an unconditional exchange of sick and wounded

prisoners. The wheels were quickly set in motion, and short weeks later preparations for Operation Little Switch were underway with the establishment of the Munsan-ni Provisional Command close by the 1stMarDiv railhead at Munsan-ni.

During the six days of Operation Little Switch from April 20-26, 149 Americans were among the 684 Allied captives released by the communists. Of these, 15 were Marines. Private Alberto Pizarro-Baez and Pvt Louis A. Pumphrey, who had been taken prisoner when Outpost Frisco was overrun in early October 1952, were the first Marines to return from captivity.

Along with their fellow returnees, they were taken to the newly constructed Freedom Village at Munsan-ni, where after an initial medical check, each returned Marine was met by a 1stMarDiv escort and given a utility cover with its Marine Corps emblem. The blue Chinese caps with which the former prisoners had been outfitted were unceremoniously dumped in the trash.

Operation Little Switch was only the precursor to its successor, Operation Big Switch. With the end of the Korean fighting in July 1953, more captured prisoners were returned. The first Marine among these on Aug. 5, the initial day of

Operation Big Switch, Private First Class Alfred P. Graham Jr. told of subsisting on a diet of cracked corn and serving as a pack mule to carry firewood 11 miles each day. PFC Pedron E. Aviles, PFC Francis E. Kohus Jr., Cpl Gethern Kennedy Jr. and PFC Bernard R. Hollinger all had similar accounts of the way they had become prisoners. Each had been clubbed senseless as their positions had been overrun. Each had similar accounts of the savagery and brutality of their captors.

A Marine combat correspondent, Technical Sergeant Richard E. Arnold, watched them come in. “It’s their first hour of freedom, and most tell you that they can still hardly believe it’s true. ... They don’t talk much. When they do, it’s mainly of ... prisoner life ... the poor chow and medical care ... the desire to fight communism again.”

That was the way they came back, with their heads up, with tears in their eyes and with the spirit of the Marine Corps still fiercely burning in them. Later, 192 Americans were found guilty of misconduct against fellow prisoners or various degrees of collaboration with the enemy. None of these were Marines. For them, Semper Fidelis was more than just a Latin phrase. It was their code of honor.

Well done, Marines! 🇺🇸



THANK YOU

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