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THE DEBRIEF Newsletter

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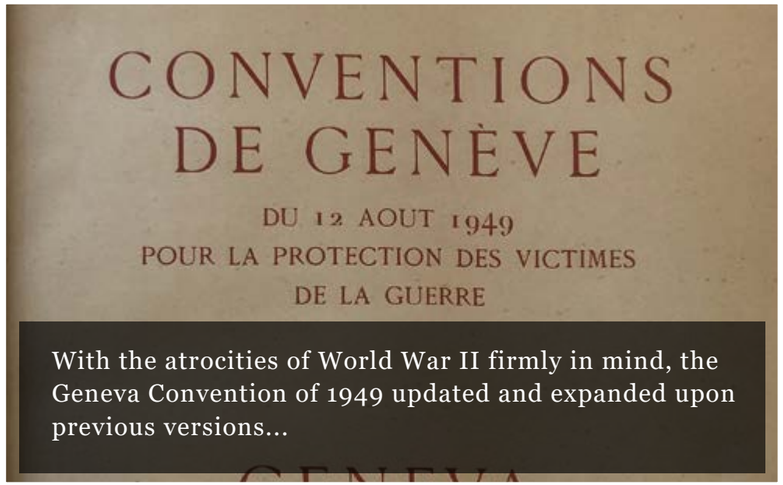
Conditions of Captivity During the Korean War



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U.S. Prisoners of War in North Korea - Experiences in Their Own Words

The JPRA Archives contains a wide variety of documents related to the Korean War and its aftermath...

JPRA Library Featured Video

Veterans share their stories of the “Forgotten War”, reminding the viewer of the human and social costs the Korean War had on the U.S. Interviewees...

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DISCLAIMER: Debriefings have produced classified information obtained under a promise of confidentiality made for the purpose of ensuring the fullest possible disclosure of information. Returned POWs have been guaranteed absolute confidentiality by the Government and promised that information regarding the conditions of their captivity, and the events surrounding their capture, captivity, and release would be treated as privileged information and not disclosed to anyone. DoD has and will continue to honor that pledge. Release would violate confidentiality agreements and constitute an unwarranted invasion of their personal privacy. Only personnel with a documented "need to know" are permitted to review returnee debriefing files. JPRA will release these materials for review to appropriate individuals or organizations when security clearances and a "need to know" have been validated.

Conditions of Captivity During the Korean War

With the atrocities of World War II firmly in mind, the Geneva Convention of 1949 updated and expanded upon previous versions. Among the world governments who sent representatives and signed the four Acts were the United States and China; neither North nor South Korea were represented.[1] The Korean War began on June 25, 1950 -- less than a year after the United States signed the Acts, and before any of the four countries had ratified them or had them enter into force.

While both the North Korean and Chinese forces publicly claimed to treat their prisoners well, the reality described by countless returning POWs was neglectful, inhumane, and degrading.[2] Army Medical Corps Captain Sidney Esensten, captured in November 1950, estimated a 75% casualty rate from the beginning of the war until the peace talks began in September 1951.[3]

Left: The Geneva Conventions of 1949. Written and transcribed in various languages.

Continued on next page...

1. International Committee of the Red Cross. 1949. The Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949. Geneva, Switzerland: International Committee of the Red Cross.

2. Creative Applied Technical Systems, Inc. 1999. Evasion and Escape in the Korean and the Vietnamese Wars. Springfield, VA: Creative Applied Technical Systems, Inc.

3. Esensten, Sidney. 1985. Memories of life as a POW: 35 years later. Published in three consecutive issues of The Graybeards (Vol. 11, No.6; Vol. 11, No. 7; Vol. 12, No. 1).

...Conditions of Captivity during the Korea War (continued)

Death Marches

Many casualties and captures came from the early months of the war, when the UN forces were pushed back nearly to the southern coast. There was no centralized escape and evasion planning, making fleeing soldiers easy pickings for the North Korean forces.[4]

One of the more infamous "death marches" of POWs took place in late October and early November, 1950. POWs crossed approximately 100 miles of rugged, mountainous terrain going from Manp'o[5] to Chunggang-up[6] over a period of ten days.[7] The group had started off from Pyongyang on 5 September 1950 and numbered 726, a mixture of military and civilian prisoners of different nationalities. They were riddled with dysentery and lice, among other ailments. At no point were the POWs provided with adequate housing, rations, or medical care. The forced work and death march ending on 9 November 1950 claimed the lives of 162 POWs (22% of the original group) by one survivor's count.

The North Korean political prison guard known as the "Tiger" (later identified as Major Chong Myong Sil) who lead this death march was mentioned by many of the survivors as particularly brutal and unforgiving. The "Tiger" was responsible for

continued on next page...

U.S. POWs held captive by North Korean forces.

4. Creative Applied Technical Systems, Inc. 1999.
5. A large city along the Yalu River in the north-central part of North Korea. Manp'o is directly across from Ji'an, Jilin Province, China.
6. The county seat of Chunggang County, northeast of Manp'o; also located along the Yalu River across from Linjiang, Jilin Province, China.
7. Rowley, Arden A., ed. 2002. U.S. Prisoners of War in the Korean War. Paducah, Kentucky: Turner Publishing Company.

...Conditions of Captivity during the Korea War (continued)

Left: Army 1st Lieutenant Cordus H. Thornton, killed in 1950 during a North Korean death march.

setting the punishing pace, including 35 kilometers on 3 November 1950; he made an example of section leader Army 1st Lieutenant Cordus H. Thornton on the first full day, when confronting the section leaders about their men who had fallen behind. After shooting Thornton in the head, the "Tiger" allowed the other prisoners to dig a shallow grave with their bare hands for Thornton's body.[8]

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Table 1: Movements of a group of POWs in 1950, including the "Tiger Death March"[9]

Date	Location	Event/Movement	Rations/Housing	Deaths/Disappearances
25 July – 5 Sep	Pyongyang	Group ended as 726 POWs on 5 Sep	School house	Several deaths from dysentery, starvation, exposure
5-11 Sep	Pyongyang to Manp'o	Travel by train; added 48 civilians	Crowded on open flat cars or dirty passenger coaches	None known
11 Sep – 11 Oct	Manp'o	Held; forced work	Old Japanese camp	Approximately 30 deaths
11-21 Oct	Manp'o to Kosal-li[10]	Forced march on 11 Oct (25 km); held and forced work		Approximately 15 deaths
21-25 Oct	Kosal-li to unnamed mining town	Forced march on 21 Oct (10 miles); held and forced work		Several deaths from exposure
25 Oct	Unnamed mining town to Kosal-li	Forced march (10 miles)	Held outside as Chinese soldiers occupied their old camp	Two deaths overnight
26 Oct	Kosal-li to cornfield near Manp'o	Forced march to five miles west of Manp'o	Held behind lumber yard in open cornfield	Two shot during march; ten died from exposure
31 Oct	Cornfield near Manp'o	"Tiger" takes over and begins death march with a total of 670 prisoners		Fifteen critically ill left behind
1 Nov	Day 1 of Tiger Death March	Marched until 2100, one 15-minute break	One meal of boiled field corn in the morning; slept on rocks	1LT Thornton executed for disobeying and leaving a man behind;
2 Nov	Day 2 of Tiger Death March	Marched until 1900, two 15-minute breaks	One meal of boiled field corn at night; had to stand inside or lay down outside for overnight rest	Thirteen left behind, supposedly sent to "People's Hospital" but never seen again
3 Nov	Day 3 of Tiger Death March	35 kilometers with two stops	Boiled field corn in the morning and rice balls during one stop	None known
4 Nov	Day 4 of Tiger Death March	Marched until 1300	1lb of powdered rice for evening meal; stayed in school building until 1200 on 5 Nov	Remaining civilians loaded on a bus to Chunggang-up (and were seen again when death march finished)
5 Nov	Day 5 of Tiger Death March	Marched from 1200 to 2000, approximately 10 miles	Spent night at school house	Twenty-two shot during march
6 Nov	Day 6 of Tiger Death March	Marched until 1700, two 15-minute breaks	Small rice ball in morning, unknown evening meal; spent night at school house	None known
7 Nov	Day 7 of Tiger Death March	Unknown time with two 15-minute breaks	Small meal of grain in the morning; rice balls with bean paste in the evening; spent night at school house	None known
8 Nov	Day 8 of Tiger Death March	Marched until 1800, two 15-minute breaks	Rice balls in the morning	None known
9 Nov				
10-20 Nov	Chunggang-up, North Korea	Held in school house, forced physical exercise	About 100 men per each room of school house, no water allowed for first 4 days	At least 20 POW deaths and an unknown number of civilian deaths

8. Creative Applied Technical Systems, Inc. 1999.
9. Reconstructed from multiple debriefs/interviews of "Tiger Death March" survivors.
10. A village within the administrative division of the city of Manp'o.

...Conditions of Captivity during the Korea War (continued)

Mistreatment at Temporary & Permanent Prison Camps

The group remained in the area of Chunggang-up until October of 1951, when they went to Chinese-run POW camps. One survivor gave a count of another 256 deaths in that period, and 15 more deaths in the Chinese-run prisoner of war camp before repatriation, for a total of 442 deaths of their original 726 (61%). He did not have an exact count of the civilians, but reported that the casualty rate among them was similar.

The "Tiger" and other North Korean captors continued to inflict cruel, unreasonable treatment on their prisoners during this period. Prisoners were subjected to multiple beatings, often for no apparent reason. Many officers received punishment of kneeling in the snow while water was poured over them, after being stripped to the waist – sometimes in sub-zero weather.

American prisoners of war march down a street in North Korea, following their capture by Communist forces.

While treatment under Chinese control was somewhat better than under the North Koreans, it still fell far below the standards of the Geneva Conventions. Esensten was captured by the Chinese, also subjected to a forced march, and held at one of the permanent camps near Pyoktong. He saw broken bones, bullet wounds, dysentery, beriberi and other vitamin deficiencies, diarrhea, pneumonia, frostbite, gangrene, lice, scabies, worms, ulcerated lesions, paralysis, hepatitis, as well as what Esensten and the other medical professionals termed "give-up-itis" – a feeling, especially among the younger POWs, that they would never go home. The worst cases stopped eating and died "three weeks to the day" later.[11]

"Esensten and the other medical professionals termed "give-up-itis" – a feeling, especially among the younger POWs, that they would never go home."

One of the more disturbing events relayed by Esensten was the "chicken liver operation" performed by Chinese doctors:

"This consisted of taking a piece of chicken liver about an inch in diameter, soaking it in a weak penicillin solution for 24 hours, incubating it at 37 degrees centigrade for 24 hours, making a small incision in the right anterior chest and inserting the piece of chicken liver subcutaneously. This was

Continued on next page...

11. Esensten, 1985.

...Conditions of Captivity during the Korea War (continued)

done on 52 men all of whom were dying, were in moribund condition, and wouldn't eat."[12]

The men with this surgery lived, not because of the chicken liver inserted subcutaneously, but because the Chinese doctors hyped up the operation as an important one that would "cure syphilis, tuberculosis, cancer, malnutrition and was a panacea for all diseases" and gave the patient steak and eggs after the surgery. To men who had been living on rice balls, millet, uncooked corn or soybeans, it was both a nutritional and morale boost.[13]

U.S. POWs held captive by North Korean forces.

Interrogation & Indoctrination

On top of the abominable physical conditions, Korean War POWs were subjected to lengthy interrogation and indoctrination sessions. Interrogation at the North Korean camps featured much of the same physical mistreatment as already described, while Chinese captors were more likely to apply mental pressure, including lengthy personnel questionnaires (which POWs would be quizzed on later, and any inconsistencies pounced on) and indoctrination or "re-education" sessions.[14]

"Besides military information, the Chinese were also focused on how to exploit and/or convert POWs to Communism, both as potential propaganda boosts."

The most notorious North Korean interrogator was Major Pak, whose domain at an interrogation center near Pyongyang was known as "Pak's Palace." Major Pak features heavily in reports from returned Air Force personnel, as nearly all survivors that had been captured in the spring of 1951 passed through the "Palace." Returnees reported incidents such as burning with lighted cigarettes and waterboarding.[15]

Besides military information, the Chinese were also focused on how to exploit and/or convert POWs to Communism, both as potential propaganda boosts. The lengthy questionnaires and subsequent quizzing were designed to give the Chinese an idea of the kind of person each POW was and how likely he was to be exploited. Lecture topics included the benefits of living in a Communist country and the evils of living in America; general political economy and Marxist discussion; and

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12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Rowley, 2002.
15. Directorate of Special Investigations, Inspector General, USAF. 1954. USAF Prisoners of War in Korea. Washington, D.C.: Headquarters United States Air Force.

...Conditions of Captivity during the Korea War (continued)

the idea that Americans had practiced germ warfare in the Far East.[16]

The two highest profile groups among the POWs were the "reactionaries" (those who refused to cooperate) and "progressives" (those who did cooperate). Each group was only about 10% of the total population, but both received more attention than the 80% in the middle due to their extreme stances. "Progressives" were investigated and sometimes prosecuted upon return, and it was a group of 21 "progressives" that chose to remain behind after the Armistice was signed.[17] [18] Mandatory lectures ceased in spring of 1952 and continued on a voluntary basis until the end of the war.[19]

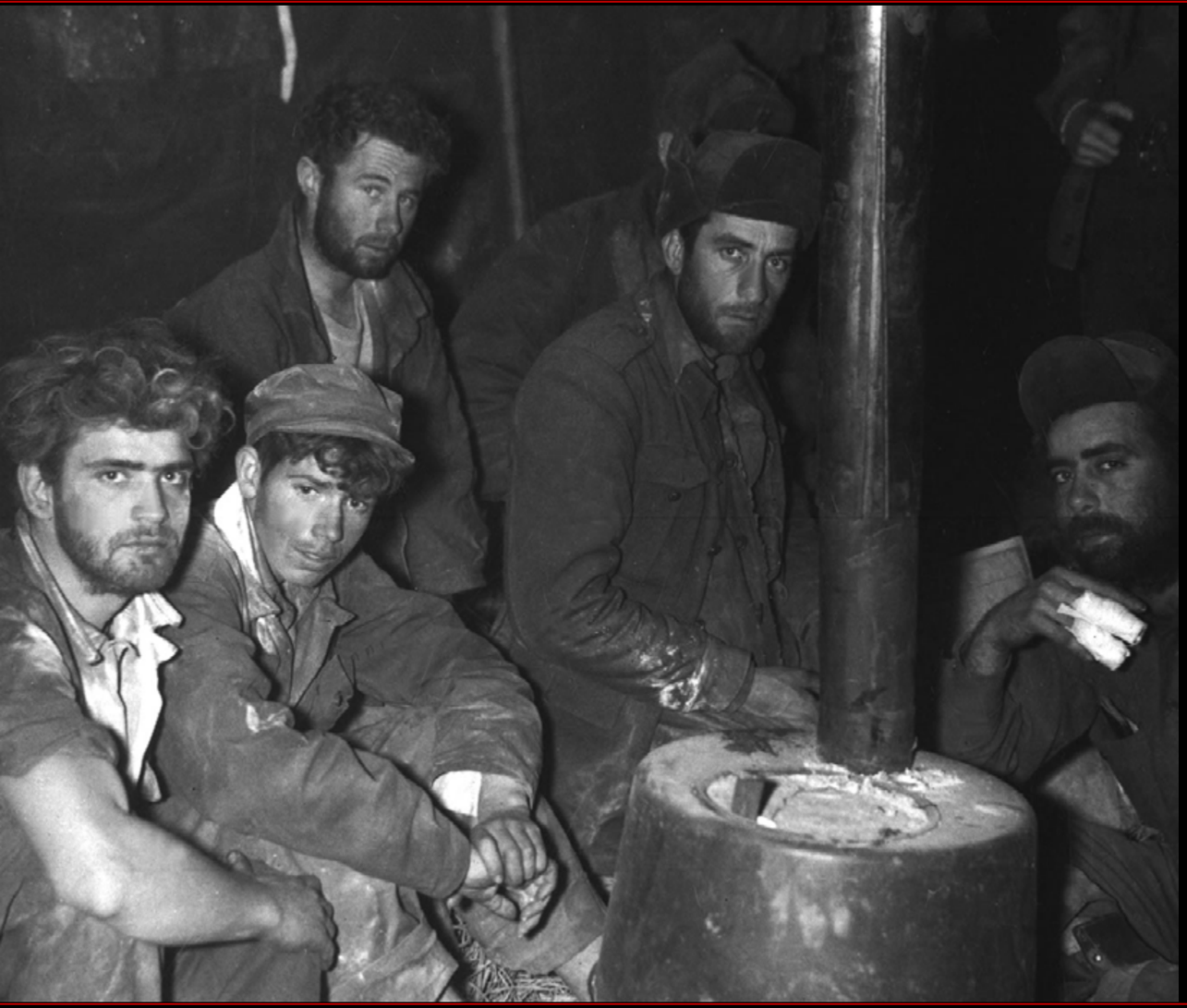
Conclusions

Many of JPRA's Army debriefs from the Korean War are focused on the war crimes and atrocities they endured or witnessed at the hands of North Korean and Chinese captors. Interviews of returned POWs highlighted the need for better preparation of soldiers going into combat in enemy territory – a need which drove the creation of the Code of Conduct and SERE training. ■

Above: Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape (SERE) is a training program, best known by its military acronym, that prepares U.S. military personnel, U.S. Department of Defense civilians, and private military contractors to survive and "return with honor" in survival scenarios.

"Interviews of returned POWs highlighted the need for better preparation of soldiers going into combat in enemy territory – a need which drove the creation of the Code of Conduct and SERE training."

16. Esensten, 1985.
17. Carlson, Lewis H. 2002. Remembered Prisoners of a Forgotten War: an oral history of Korean War POWs. New York: St. Martin's Press.
18. See the previous issue of The Debrief for an in-depth look at the 21 who stayed.
19. Rowley, 2002.



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U.S. Prisoners of War in North Korea - Experiences in Their Own Words

The JPRA Archives contains a wide variety of documents related to the Korean War and its aftermath. Out of the 239 USAF personnel who were captured during the war, the JPRA Archives has a total of 228 of their debriefings. Also, over 800 full or partial debriefing statements can be found from Army personnel describing their experiences of capture, interment, interrogation, and repatriation. In these documents, you will easily find out what their psychological state was, how well their wounds and injuries were treated, how well they were fed and treated by the North Koreans and Chinese, among other things, as well as how easily the prisoners were able to be captured in the first place.

Left: U.S. POWs in North Korea.

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...U.S. Prisoners of War in North Korea - Experiences in Thier Own Words (continued)

One of the highlights of our collection is our selection of affidavits given by repatriated prisoners of war. Reading what the former POWs said in their own words will give tremendous insight into the kinds of duress that they suffered and the atrocities committed by the adversary. While we can't highlight any quotations from the actual affidavits (because of privacy and security concerns), we can highlight some of what prisoners of war experiences from oral histories that strongly resemble what's found in the affidavits.[1] According to one prisoner of war, in 1951 in the town of Hanjang-ni in North Korea, he and a fellow prisoner was beaten by a North Korean camp guard so severely that his companion suffered fatal injuries. This was all for stealing a rice ball out of desperate hunger. In the statement, the POW describes what happened to him and his fellow prisoner once held in the camp: [See figure 1]

Conditions would sometimes become so severe, that some POWs managed to suspect and often times correctly predict which prisoners were going to die. According to one: "If you saw a guy who was really desperately sick—couldn't eat or hold food down—you knew he was a goner."[3] Another said, "Another phenomenon was premonition of death. People who were relatively well would tell the men in their rooms, 'Don't bother to wake me in the morning, because you will not be able to get me up.' One hundred percent of the time they were right."[4] As for the dead bodies of prisoner of war, while the North Koreans simply dumped the bodies out of the camp to be devoured by animals, some POWs managed to at least try to bury them. After removing their dog togs, some prisoners managed to bury their fallen comrades in trenches often while their bodies and the ground was still frozen. This became more difficult to complete in winter when the rocky terrain made it nearly impossible to bury the dead.[5]

Other hardships that prisoners of war were subjected to

Continued on next page...

Figure 1

"The guard stripped us to the waist in below zero weather and made us stand there for what seemed like an eternity but in reality was probably twenty-five or thirty minutes. In that weather it doesn't take long to freeze to death. The guard poured ice water on us and then beat us with a tree limb which was much larger than just a switch. He struck us several times each. It felt as if he was bringing up blood every time he struck me. I thought I had suffered some bad pain with my ear infection, but it was nothing compared to that beating. But the worst was when he let us go inside, and we began to thaw out. We rubbed our bodies to get the blood circulating, and that was the worst pain I've ever experienced. My joints felt as if they were going to explode. It felt like every fiver in my entire body was being torn apart. All we could do was scream. About three days later my friend died."[2]

1. Professor Lewis H. Carlson published a book in 2002 entitled: Remembered Prisoners of a Forgotten War: An Oral History of Korean War POWs that uses the oral histories of several U.S. prisoners of war from Korea that he recorded. Most of the quotations of prisoners of war experiences will be from this book, found in the JPRA Library and available for checkout.

2. Carlson, Lewis H. Remembered Prisoners of a Forgotten War: An Oral History of Korean War POWs (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002), 84.
3. Ibid, 139.
4. Ibid, 140.
5. Ibid, 140-141.

...U.S. Prisoners of War in North Korea - Experiences in Thier Own Words (continued)

being subjected to grueling interrogations and propaganda courses initiated by the Chinese and North Koreans. While the new prisoners of war had little information that could be valuable to the Chinese and North Koreans, the Chinese and North Koreans saw interrogations as useful if they can break down a prisoner's physical and mental state. In the words of one prisoner of war who was also a Korean American:
[See figure 2]

According to the words of another POW: [See figure 3]

After breaking down whatever resistance the prisoners might have had to Communism (especially by depriving them of basic necessities such as food and warmth in the camps), the prisoners would be kept so confused that they would be vulnerable to whatever the captors wanted to subject them to.[8]

According to the testimony, the propaganda courses were consisted of a formal study program. For around one year, most of the prisoners would spend their time in organized study classes. As long as the prisoners cooperated, better food would be served and overall living conditions would improve. The formal study program consisted of an endless repetition of two main themes; first, that the

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Figure 2

"When the North Koreas wanted something from you, they would give you a butt stroke with their rifle or punch or kick you. As a Korean American I knew the language, so they used me as an interpreter, and whenever they didn't like the answers, they always blamed me because I hadn't instructed the other prisoners correctly. I would then get worked over. I remember one time they stripped me naked and gave me a bamboo rod with a basket on each end. I had to fill the baskets with dirt and carry them back and forth for a couple of miles until I finally passed out."[6]

Figure 3

"It is important to realize that every aspect of the daily life of the prisoner, from the moment of capture to the time of release, was part of the general plan of indoctrination. At the time of capture, each prisoner was given the general theme of indoctrination: "We are your friends. Your conditions of living are bad now, but we will work together to improve them. We will correct the errors in your thinking. Once you have learned the truth, we will send you back to your families."[7]

6. Ibid, 181.
7. Ibid, 179.
8. Ibid, 179.

...U.S. Prisoners of War in North Korea - Experiences in Thier Own Words (continued)

United States government is imperialistic, run by and for the wealthy few, and second, that Communism reflects the aims and desires of all the people and is the only true democracy."[9] Many of the American prisoners of war in North Korea simply chose to ignore the indoctrination attempts by their captors and only pretended to go along with the study program. As one prisoner of war testified in an oral history: [See figure 4]

While some were able to resist, others were less resilient. One prisoner of war recounted: [See figure 5]

The vast majority were able to not collaborate with the Communists, but the few cases of those who did prompted the U.S. Department of Defense to review their training for service personnel in combat survival, that would lead to more resilience and less fragility in the warfighter. It also prompted the Department of Defense to develop a standard Code of Conduct for prisoners of war that will reiterate the provisions of the Geneva Conventions. This would be signed as Executive Order 10631 by President Dwight D. Eisenhower on August 17, 1955.

This is just a small sample of the many human rights violations endured by United States prisoners of war at the

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Figure 4

"When they would start one of their propaganda sessions, I developed the ability just to turn off my mind. It took a while to be able to do this. You couldn't horse around and not appear to pay attention during these lectures because they'd rap you one. So I worked on my response, and eventually I could just stare them right in the eye and not hear a thing they said. I would just think about something else. But this became a bad habit that followed me home. Someone would be talking, and all of a sudden I'd be gone. My wife has often accused me of this very thing."[10]

Figure 5

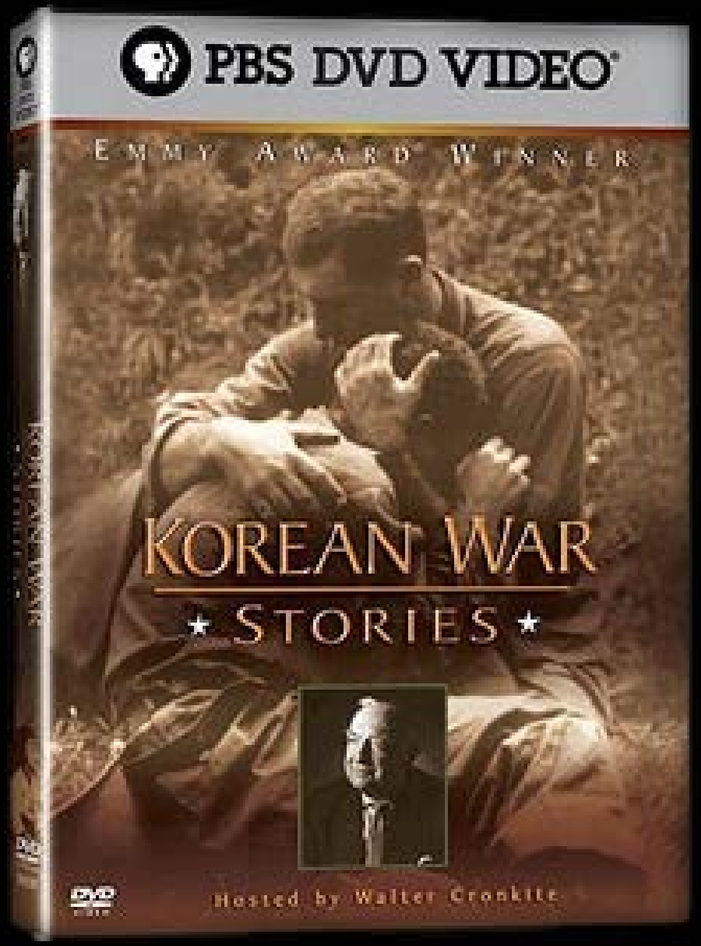
"You'd just sit there and pretend to go along [with the propaganda sessions]. But there were a few guys who became so weak, the Chinese could tempt them with something to eat in exchange for spying on their buddies. These were the Rats, and there were a few in my camp but not many. Some of these guys later got beaten up pretty badly, so they had to more or less stay in the protective custody of the Chinese."[11]

9. Ibid, 179.
10. Ibid, 190-91.
11. Ibid, 191.

...U.S. Prisoners of War in North Korea - Experiences in Thier Own Words (continued)

hands of Communist powers, and the way the prisoners were able to cope and survive. While these events may have occurred more than 60 years ago, they still hold great relevance for those who wish to research and study the way atrocities and human rights breaches were committed in the past and how they may influence warfare and conflict in the present day.

The JPRA Archives also has 536 interrogation reports from North Korean and Chinese POWs who were captured by the United States and its allies, as well as various lists, statistics, studies, and letters related to POW/MIA activity during the Korean War. More books related to the Korean War can also be checked out from the JPRA Library. For more information, please contact the Library and Archives at (703) 704-2264/2378 or js.belvoir.jpra.mbx.j7-9-library-archives@mail.mil. ■



JPRA Library – Featured Video

For more information on the veterans' perspective of the Korean War, make sure to check out our featured library video for this quarter:

Korean War Stories. Narrated by Walter Cronkite. 60 minutes long. Produced and directed by Robert Uth. Alexandria, Va.: PBS Home Video, 2004. Call Number: Vid. DS921.6 .K67 2004 Veterans share their stories of the "Forgotten War", reminding the viewer of the human and social costs the Korean War had on the U.S. Interviewees include Senators John Glenn and John S. Warner, baseball player Ted Williams, musician Willie Nelson, former Secretary of State James Baker, Rep. Charles Rangel, Lt. Col. Charles B. "Brad" Smith, Gen. Raymond Davis. **This DVD won the Emmy Award for Outstanding Historical Documentary in 2002.**

--- From PBS