

AN ANALYSIS OF THE CODE OF CONDUCT AT THE  
HOA LO PRISON (HANOI HILTON), N. VIETNAM

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## OUTLINE

### A. An analysis of the Code of Conduct at the Hoa Lo prison (Hanoi Hilton)

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2. Hanoi Hilton
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The Code of Conduct was the reference point for the prisoners at the Hoa Lo prison (Hanoi Hilton) in North Vietnam during the conflict in Southeast Asia. The literal application of the code was difficult in light of the torture and interrogation by the North Vietnamese. The code provided a guideline for American servicemen captured by the enemy.

Almost all of the former POWs expressed support for the code, crediting it as a great aid to their survival because it provided a framework by which to live and a philosophy to work toward. The former POWs seemed eager to express the point that it is not possible to adhere strictly to the code in the literal sense, but that it is possible to abide by it in spirit.<sup>1</sup>

After the Korean War, the need for a written standard of behavior for American servicemen captured and imprisoned was declared by the military. In 1955, the Code of Conduct was written based on military traditions and principles dating back to the 1750's. The need originated from the mistreatment and questionable conduct of individual U.S. POWs returning from Korea.<sup>2</sup> For the prisoners of the Hanoi Hilton, the code was extremely useful. Due to the nature of the conflict in Vietnam, the North Vietnamese realized the most important weapon against the military would be propaganda.<sup>3</sup> The most vulnerable

target became the prisoners of war. Through torture, interrogation and, deprivation of the basic needs, the North Vietnamese were able to obtain confessions and anti-war statements. As the North Vietnamese pushed for information and confession from American prisoners, the need for the Code of Conduct for direction and reference became a necessity.

The Hanoi Hilton was a French-built complex located in the center of Hanoi. <sup>4</sup> Most of the rooms were built to accompany one prisoner. The floors were cement with a urination gutter running along the doorways. Rats, lice and other disease-carrying animals lived in and around the prisoners. Asian flu and infections were common among the prisoners. To add to the problem, clothes were washed in a well next to a sewage ditch. Soap was a treasured commodity by the prisoners. Survival was a constant shadow on the prisoners thoughts. The key was to work together even though most men were kept in solitary confinement. Coded communication was the information source for all prisoners in the Hanoi Hilton. <sup>5</sup>

Over seven hundred prisoners, mainly Air Force and Navy officers were kept in the Hilton or surrounding prison camps. The other camps in the Hanoi area were used to rotate prisoners. Rotation was a futile attempt by the North Vietnamese to break up communication by the American prisoners.

For the prisoners of the Hanoi Hilton, loyalty and resistance became the factors which kept cohesion among American prisoners. To properly analyze the actions of the men held at the Hanoi Hilton, each of the six articles from the Code of Conduct must be addressed in detail.

The first article of the Code of Conduct is a vow of absolute loyalty.

I am an American fighting man. I serve in the forces which guard my country and our way of life. I am prepared to give my life in their defense.

This statement is a declaration of true allegiance and self denial. Our country was born through revolution and the same individual allegiance as stated in the first article. The soldier sacrifice in battle for American freedom has always been the earmark of our past success in war. In normal circumstances, the battlefield leaves no room for contemplation of self sacrifice. Most soldiers understand the commitment and execute the orders given. In the Hanoi Hilton prison, deprivation and loneliness provided the incentive for selfish contemplation. But, the intestinal fortitude of the American fighting man in the Hanoi Hilton and fellowship between prisoners helped to resist complacency. The same complacency that violates the first article of the code.

The second article of the Code of Conduct refers to surrender.

I will never surrender of my own free will. If in  
command I will never surrender my men while they have  
the means to resist.

Surrender, in the case of a prisoner at the Hanoi Hilton,  
involved compliance with the enemy's desires. Though captured, each  
prisoner has an obligation to resist. Considering the extreme  
pressure on an individual at the Hanoi Hilton, surrender becomes a  
command problem. The senior leaders in the Hanoi Hilton realized a  
strong, well defined chain of command was needed. Leadership would be  
the focus in strengthening the will of the prisoners. It is incumbent  
upon the leaders to set the example. In the Hanoi Hilton, the formal  
chain of command was extremely effective. The example of proper  
resistance continually came from the top of the chain of command. The  
leaders knew their own actions would be closely scrutinized by the men  
of their command. The North Vietnamese would use any weakness to  
cause dissention among the Americans. The importance of never  
surrendering any factual information became the perfect resistance.

The third article addresses resistance.

If I am captured I will resist by all means available.

I will make every effort to escape and aid others to escape. I will accept neither parole nor special favors  
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from the enemy.

Resistance was an obligation for the prisoners. The means by which the obligation was met varied from silence to escape. The constant application of the third article was carried out with cunning and deception. The North Vietnamese were only able to marginally control American resistance. Few were able to escape from the Hanoi Hilton, but the chain of command for the Americans insisted that prisoners only give interrogators minimal information. The prisoners relied on personal pride and each other to consistently resist in each  
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individual interrogation.

Major (ret.) Thomas O. Schesinger defines the obligation of resistance as either a positive or negative obligation.

"Negative obligations" require that he not join or actively aid the other side by giving information, collaborating, or "confessions". "Positive obligations," however, such as those implied by the code's demand that the PW remain a "fighting man" and continue to resist by all means available, are said to arise from the individual's role in a

particular group.

The emphasis of the group in positive obligations refers to an effective chain of command and positive leadership on the part of the Americans. Peer pressure is also a factor for strengthening the will of each prisoner. The group effort at the Hanoi Hilton relied upon a coded communication system. With most of the prisoners in solitary confinement, tapping coughing, and other methods of covert communication were used. Once the information began to flow up and down the chain of command, those who needed medical attention were identified. Others having it rough psychologically received inspirational messages from other prisoners.

LTC Jim Thompson professes that during his seven years, part of that time in the Hanoi Hilton, the inspirational messages were the main reason he survived. He explains that the communication became so diverse it took a new prisoner months to comprehend all the modes and methods. Also, the instantaneous dissemination throughout the camp increased the individual resistance significantly.

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LTC Thompson had spent many evenings plotting and planning escape scenarios. The information was sent up the chain of command, reviewed by others, and sent back to him. He said many of the officers would do the same planning. Most of the plans never got off the ground due to tight security and their location in North Vietnam. The most important aspect was that prisoners were using their minds



constructively. This allowed them to pass the time and kept their thoughts off the present situation.

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The fourth article stipulates the allegiance to other prisoners and the duties of each soldier with respect to the chain of command.

If I become a prisoner of war, I will keep faith with my fellow prisoners. I will give no information or take part in any action which may be harmful to my fellow comrades. If I am senior, I will take command. If not, I will obey the lawful orders of those appointed over me and will back them up in every way.

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The ability to effectively resist increased the cohesive outlook the prisoners had on communication within the walls of the Hanoi Hilton. The leadership in the prison, specifically Navy Captain Jeremiah Denton and Col. Risner, would receive messages informing them of weak prisoners who were giving up information to the interrogators within days of arrival. Both men would concentrate their efforts at communicating the standards of resistance and reassure the weak prisoners of the chain of command. At one point, Denton was identified as the leader by the North Vietnamese. He experienced weeks of torture, but maintained the resistance he had espoused to all the prisoners over the years. His actions were the epitome of leadership by example.

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In 1966, Jeremiah Denton was allowed to be interviewed by a Japanese reporter. The North Vietnamese planned to use this opportunity to show the world their civility in dealing with prisoners of war. When Denton finally arrived at the location of the interview, he realized the interview would be filmed. As the interview began, he realized this was the perfect opportunity to communicate to the outside.

I felt my heart pounding; sweat popped out on my forehead; the palms of my hands became slippery. I looked directly into the camera and blinked my eyes once, slowly, then three more times slowly. A dash, and three more dashes. A quick blink, slow blink, quick blink.

T...O...R.....

While the Japanese droned on in a high pitched voice, I blinked out the desperate message over and over.

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T..O..R..T..U..R..E...

The North Vietnamese never realized the ingenuous message Jeremiah Denton was sending. Later the president and the nation would see the interview. Two days later Mrs. Denton received a letter from the president acknowledging the courage of her husband.

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The fifth article states,

When questioned, should I become a prisoner of war, I am required to give name, rank, service number, and date of birth. I will evade answering further questions to the utmost of my ability. I will make no oral or written statements disloyal to my country and its allies or harmful to their cause.

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All prisoners knew this article best. The initial interrogation addressed questions pertaining to personal facts and information. In all the references used in writing this paper, one factor stood above all others; torture was used at the Hanoi Hilton to obtain as much information as possible. The majority of the prisoners resisted violation of the fifth article, but the torture was overwhelming. The technique used most often when the torture was too intense was to give up false or useless information to satisfy the interrogator. The term applied to this technique was "roll".

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Col. Risner and the other men in the North Vietnamese prison system soon learned this. They formulated policies to reflect the importance of striving to live by the spirit of the code and of resisting enemy demands.

Once broken, the American POWs were instructed to "roll" by giving their captors something unimportant in order to satisfy them.  
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Jeremiah Denton found himself in the same predicament on many occasions. In May, 1966, Denton was tortured by having his body contorted using shackles until submission. At which time he had no other alternative but to give in to the interrogation team.

I had no resistance left and had to agree. I would write a paper full of ridiculous information. I figured they would accept anything, and during the next three days I wrote thirty-six pages of the silliest nonsense I could think of. I was right. They never asked me about the paper after I turned it in, nor did they ever  
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torture me for military information.

Again the Code of Conduct became the reference point, but human judgement in trying moments had to be applied. The couragous actions of Jeremiah Denton and all the other prisoners of the Hanoi Hilton must be applauded. They were all able to show their intense loyalty even after being captured. The last article of the Code of Conduct

addresses the pride in nation and remembrance of the heavy price for freedom.

I will never forget that I am an American fighting man, responsible for my actions, and dedicated to the principles which made my country free. I will trust in my God and in the United States of America.

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## NOTES

1. Greg Eanes, "Does the Code of Conduct Still Apply," Army 35, No. 6 (June 1985): p. 47.
2. Ibid., p. 45.
3. Ibid., p. 45.
4. Jeremiah A. Denton Jr., When Hell was in Session, ed. Ed Brandt (New York: Readers Digest Press, 1976), p. vii.
5. Ibid., p. viii.
6. Department of the Army, Code of Conduct, DA Pam 27-1 (Oct 78), Article I.
7. Eanes, p. 46.
8. Ibid., p. 45.
9. Code of Conduct, Article II.
10. Howard and Phyllis Rutledge, In the Presence of Mine Enemies, ed. Mel and Lyla White (New Jersey: Revell Company, 1973), p. 82.
11. Rutledge, p. 59.
12. Code of Conduct, Article III.
13. Captain Eugene B. McDaniel, USN, Before Honor, ed. James L. Johnson (New York: A. J. Holman Company, 1975), p. 113.
14. Major Thoomas D. Schlesinger, "Obligations of the Prisoner of War," Military Review (December 1970): p. 84.
15. LTC James Thompson, personal communication, Ft. Benning, Ga., June 1974.
16. Ibid.
17. Code of Conduct, Article IV.
18. Denton, p. 74.
19. Ibid., pp. 91-92.
20. Ibid., pp. 101-102.
21. Code of Conduct, Article V.

22. Schlesinger, p. 84.
23. Eanes, p. 45.
24. Denton, p. 96.
25. Code of Conduct, Article VI.

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