

MIND GAMES

Jim Warner and Fellow POWs Played for Big Stakes in North Vietnamese Prisons

By R. R. Keene with Dick Camp

It was an empty pack of Vietnamese cigarettes carelessly discarded by a guard. To break up the drudgery of guarding prisoners, guards would squat under their pith helmets, smoke and sometimes throw the packs, empty of “*Tam thanh*” brand smokes, to the wind.

James “Jim” Warner, a Marine captain, had been a prisoner of war since Friday, 13 Oct. 1967. Two years later he was still a POW. It was a long nightmare, and the prospects of his incarceration ending anytime soon, if ever, weren’t good.

He and his pilot survived the ground fire that brought down their F-4 Phantom fighter-attack aircraft just north of the Ben Hai River on the wrong side of the Demilitarized Zone. The soldiers of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam thrust Warner and his pilot into captivity.

Warner was beaten, tortured, threatened and cajoled. He and fellow POWs such as Navy Lieutenant Commander John S. McCain III, Air Force Major George E. “Bud” Day (who would later be awarded the Medal of Honor), Marine Capt Orson G. Swindle, and other Americans, were all wards of the communists who in return wanted confessions and propaganda.

“They were always telling us prisoners the same thing: ‘If you apologize, you can go home.’ I was pessimistic, and I thought I’d probably be there for 20 years,” Warner said.

The possibility of languishing in a communist hoosegow for an unknown number of years made it imperative for the POWs, who were for the most part segregated from one another, to communicate with their fellow inmates. “Guys would tell jokes by tapping on the walls. You were literally risking life and limb, but we did it to tell poems or jokes, just to communicate, and it really made a difference,” Warner said.

One Navy pilot, Commander Jeremiah A. “Jerry” Denton, who had been a prisoner since 1965, was noted for his optimism, according to Warner. “He tapped

Capt Jim Warner was a 26-year-old radar intercept officer with Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 323, Marine Aircraft Group 13, based at Chu Lai, South Vietnam. His F-4B Phantom was shot down north of the DMZ, sending Warner and his pilot into captivity as prisoners of the North Vietnamese. It was there that Americans learned and demonstrated what they were made of. (Photo courtesy of James H. Warner)



a message to another prisoner, saying: ‘I think we’re going home soon.’ ‘Why do you think that?’ ‘Because one of the guards took his shoes off before he kicked me.’

“They were vicious,” Warner said of his captors. The first two years were rough. Warner particularly recalls his time in solitary confinement. “I was in this little box out in the sun. It was really hot as hell in there. I don’t know why I didn’t die.”

His communist captors continued to probe for propaganda and confessions.

“They gave us a *Life* magazine article about the tiger cages [being used by the government of South Vietnam to house prisoners and the subject of protest by antiwar activists in the United States]. I was taken to interrogation, and the officer said, ‘What do you think of these tiger cages?’ I said, ‘Well, if you’ve got prisons like that, why can’t we be in those prisons?’

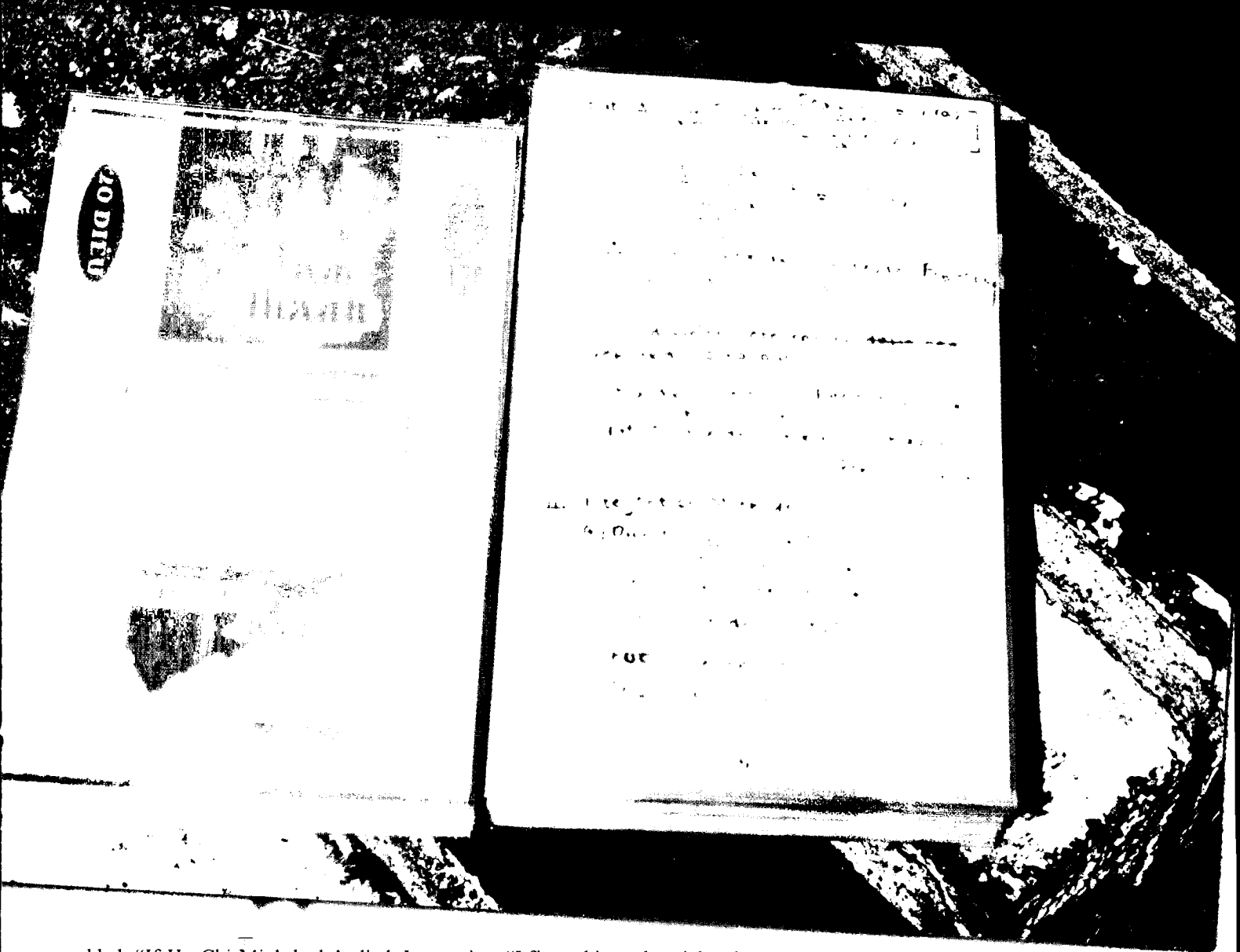
“‘What do you mean?’ he replied.

“‘Look how big those cells are—they got bars on the ceilings so the hot air can run. We want to be in those prisons.’

“He said, ‘I do not give this to you for comparison! Just for criticism!’”

The communists and their prisoners were engaged in a tapestry of mind games. The captors tried to trick and coerce the POWs into passing information, and the prisoners tried to give them as little as possible. They even tried to covertly communicate by hanging their laundry in Morse code, hoping an American spy plane or satellite would pick up on it. No matter who was masterminding the games, it always had the potential to be very bad for the POWs.

“By God’s grace they announced that Ho Chi Minh died [2 Sept. 1969] and suddenly all this stuff stopped,” Warner



added. "If Ho Chi Minh hadn't died, I think I would have, because I was in very bad shape."

He noted that there was a common denominator with the POWs in that after a while "things would just start going wrong. They'd start losing weight, become listless. They would get to a certain point and stay there. But they didn't die. Almost everybody was a fighter pilot, and I think that somehow that helped keep guys going."

They learned that exercising their minds was vital to survival. Many resorted to playing games in their minds. For Warner, the game in his mind had started even before Ho's death.

"I was bored. I was in solitary, and for some reason I realized I didn't know much math, especially calculus."

He thought about that in his cell as he contemplated a u-shaped string draped on a mosquito net and "knew it was a catenary." He wondered what was the gravitational force (its own weight) on that

string. "I figured it out by trial and error and counting underneath the squares in the mosquito net. Then I guessed, and I guessed correctly, that it was the slope of a line at a given point."

Such mathematical equations and formulas may seem a source of headaches. Warner shrugs it off: "If you don't have anything to do with your time, it is easy to do stuff." His head game wasn't that uncommon among prisoners. "Some guys thought of dictionaries; some made them in French, Spanish and German just to have their brains working."

He would envision math problems and work out the equations, "or there'd be something I didn't know and I would ask another prisoner and somebody would tell me. We had a lot of guys who had advanced degrees in physics or engineering or math."

That's when he got the idea to write down solutions to various math-related problems.

Writing paper and writing instruments

Two years into his captivity, Jim Warner, using the backs of discarded empty Vietnamese cigarette packs, surreptitiously began handwriting his book. The book was a hand/notebook for solving calculus problems. He smuggled it out of country, had it laminated and later used it in college. (Photo by Nancy Lee White Hoffman)

were not permitted. The guards, however, unknowingly provided. "They smoked socialist cigarettes. You have to understand socialists can't do anything right. Everything they do crumbles. When they finished smoking, they threw the packs on the ground. I grabbed the packs and soaked them in water. The packs were held together with socialist glue, the same stuff you made in grade school—flour and water—so it took no time at all to soak all the glue off the paper. Then I put it under my mat and let it dry.

"We had a guy who was extremely skilled with his hands. He made pens out of bamboo. He made ink out of ... I have

Below: Recently at The Globe & Laurel Restaurant in Triangle, Va., Jim Warner presented his laminated book to Greg Cina, an archivist with the U.S. Marine Corps Archives and Special Collections, Marine Corps University. The book most likely will be displayed at the National Museum of the Marine Corps. (Photo by Nancy Lee White Hoffman)



Above: Jim Warner, shown here on the day of his release, being welcomed to freedom at Clark Air Base in the Republic of the Philippines. He had been a POW from 13 Oct. 1967 to 14 March 1973, and it had taken its toll. Warner had lost a lot of weight but never lost his dignity or his belief in his country. (Photo courtesy of James H. Warner)

no idea what it was, but he made ink."

The first half of Warner's book, in fact several editions, kept getting confiscated and torn up. "They were written with the ink that he made," said Warner "and then he decided that wasn't good enough, so he stole ink from the Vietnamese."

Warner kept writing. His captors kept confiscating, and after a while they gave up. "The last two or three months of our captivity, they didn't come into our rooms or inspect."

Sensing there may be something in the wind, Warner pushed himself and not only got the equations right, but finished his project. He composed his thoughts in a concise and clear manner and wrote them in neat, legible letters and did so with no error. "That's because in my brain, I had to keep doing it over and over."

"I finished the last pages of the book [63 in all] about six weeks before we were released. I started in October of 1969, and finally finished it in February of '73."

"After the peace agreement was signed, the North Vietnamese more or less left us alone. We didn't know for sure, even when we were on the plane and the plane was airborne, if it was really happening."

One POW nudged him and said: "I know these people [the Vietnamese communists]. They are gonna screw this up. I know they're gonna screw it up."

He was, thankfully, wrong. The first group of prisoners left Vietnam in February 1973. On 14 March, the American plane carrying Warner with his book, and his fellow POWs, left Vietnamese airspace amid cheers from emaciated men who beat some tremendous odds.

Looking back, Warner has a pragmatic view and tempers it with a wry sense of humor. "What I see in all of my comrades is the same thing I see in myself. It probably was a benefit to us."

"I always say the 'Hanoi Hilton,' to be honest, wasn't as much fun as it sounds. In terms of character, everybody [the POWs] that I know, when we came home, would get their focus on one thing and they would not let go. Everybody was like a bulldog. They'd go after stuff, work hard."

Warner went back to college. "I started as a first-semester sophomore at the University of Michigan and got an undergraduate degree and then went to law school and got a law degree. Everybody has stories like that. I know back then they depicted how everybody was going to be a wreck. I found an article that somebody had written as a research project. (I was not part of the research.) It concluded that all of us POWs have post-traumatic stress disorder, but almost nobody has it very badly. It didn't really cripple anybody. And they wanted to know why. I assume it was the same thing that made guys who started to fall apart, not die. Something was there."

That's not to say it was all smooth sailing when Warner returned. "The college didn't treat me very well. Many of the professors were openly hostile. Almost a week never went by when somebody didn't say something, either about me or about Vietnam."

Warner, who had played mind games against the best, checked himself. "I learned to be patient."

"I had been about two months at school. And there were posters going up about how badly prisoners were treated by the South Vietnamese."

"The Young Republicans asked me to talk about how I was treated. I talked and opened it up for questions. Some long-haired guy stood up and started ranting at me, saying that I'm no better than a Nazi, and I should have been killed. He had no doubt that I deserved torture."

"I smiled, walked up to him, put my arm around him and said, 'Pal, you don't know how damn close you are.' He left."

It was another mind game, like the one Warner once played with the North Vietnamese interrogator, only the long-haired fellow had never played for big stakes. "I decided that these are impulses that need to be governed, but that long-haired guy was mighty close to being in real trouble."

Warner used his "book" of math in college. He had the pages laminated and used the book as a reference, "primarily to refresh my mind. So in my calculus course, I just picked up my book."

He no longer needs the book, or to have it nearby, as a reminder of his five-year experience in North Vietnam. In September 2007, he handed his book over to the National Museum of the Marine Corps in Triangle, Va., near Quantico. Even to those who've never ventured into the Rubik's Cube world of calculus, Warner's writing, clearly printed on the inside of cigarette packs, is an artifact of that war that makes one want to know what kind of men were these who forced themselves to play such mind games.

