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CURRENT STATUS AND SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT OF
U. S. ARMY RETURNED PRISONERS OF WAR

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REPORT NO. 78-38

JUL 23 1980

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CURRENT STATUS AND SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT OF US
ARMY RETURNED PRISONERS OF WAR

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Presentation made at the Fifth Annual Joint Medical Meeting Concerning POW/MIA Matters, 19-20 September 1978, San Antonio, Texas

The views presented in this paper are those of the author. No endorsement by the Department of the Navy or the Department of the Army has been given or should be inferred.

CURRENT STATUS AND SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT OF US ARMY
RETURNED PRISONERS OF WAR

Introduction

During the next few minutes I will describe the current military status of the 77 US Army returned prisoners of war and then provide a brief summary of some of our research findings related to their present social adjustment to include their financial, occupational, personal parent-child and marital adjustment.

BACKGROUND

First, however, as a bit of background I would like to briefly describe the Army RPW population as they were at the time of repatriation in 1973 and to note some of the characteristics which differentiated this population from their Navy and Air Force counterparts. Of the 566 military POW returnees, only 77 (or approximately 14%) were US Army affiliates. While all Navy returnees were officer personnel, the majority or 64 percent of the Army returnees were enlisted. Of all returned military personnel, Army returnees were the youngest. The mean age for the Army Officers was 27.5 years and 23 years for the enlisted personnel. It might also be noted that only slightly more than half of the enlisted returnees were high school graduates whereas the majority of the officer personnel had earned a college degree. Regarding marital status, 49 percent of the Army returnees were single as compared to only 27 percent of the Navy returnees. The Army captives were, for the most part, held in South Vietnam for at least part of their imprisonment, rather than Hanoi.

Although they generally suffered less torture and brutality and were subjected to fewer interrogations than those held in the North, their experience was a constant day-to-day struggle for survival. They were held in temporary facilities in a tropical climate, were frequently moved from place to place and were often at the very end of the supply chain, resulting in a severe lack of food and medical supplies.

As a group then, when compared with returnees from the other services, the Army returnees were more likely to be enlisted rather than officer; be unmarried rather than married; were younger and had fewer years of formal education. Their captivity experience was marked by severe physical deprivation, and it was not surprising that, at the time of homecoming, they presented more diagnoses and different types of symptomatology than the men held in the North. It is interesting to note that those held in the North were, for the most part, subjected to greater psychological and physical torture and yet, upon return, it was the group held in the South, primarily Army, that showed the greater psychological dysfunction as well as the greater physical symptomatology.

Now, having briefly reviewed the background information let us look at selected aspects of the social adjustment of this group during the five years since repatriation.

SAMPLE AND METHOD

The data collection for this portion of this report was accomplished during the period January through September 1978 by the staff of social

workers and psychologists of the Family Studies Branch of the Center for POW Studies and Mrs. O'Neal of Dr. Dean's staff at Brooke Army Medical Center. The data reported here, other than the basic demographic variables, are based on information gathered during personal interviews of the first 41 individuals seen and represents 53 percent of the Army returnees. In that this was the fifth, and possibly the final year of the follow-up, a change in service availability to the RPW's and their families was expected to result. Therefore, rather than random sampling as had been done for past family interviews, all Army RPWs and their families were contacted and asked if a staff member might visit them in their home. By 30 September 1978 family and/or personal interviews will have been conducted with 69 of the 77 Army returnees and represents a 90 percent data return rate. Of the eight individuals with whom interviews were not scheduled, three are residing outside CONUS and have been mailed questionnaires, four preferred not to participate, and one could not be located.

These family interviews also served a clinical function in addition to the data collection process. Interviewers provided supportive and therapeutic input when indicated as well as providing information to families regarding military, veterans and civilian services in their community. Those families or individuals who were experiencing social, psychological, medical, legal or financial problems were referred to the appropriate civilian or military resource for assistance. Past experience has indicated that many persons are reluctant to utilize available helping resources. So in those cases where the need was great and with the consent of the

individual, our staff member would contact the appropriate agency and request that they provide an outreach to the family or individual.

The data collection portion of the interview included both questionnaires and structured interviews. These were utilized to elicit specific demographic information as well as psychological and social data related to individual and family adjustment.

Findings

Of the original 77 returnees, 39 percent (N = 30) remain on active duty. Of the 47 who have left the service only four have retired due to length of service. The remaining were either medically retired or voluntarily separated.

Over 25 percent of the respondents reported that during the past five years they have experienced some type of financial difficulty. The majority of these report the financial problems to have been most severe during the past two years. Fifty-five percent reported job dissatisfaction, again, most frequently reported for the past two years.

In terms of perceived personal adjustment, over half of the individuals report feelings of loneliness, worry about physical health, feelings of frustration and feelings of depression. Between 25 - 50 percent report feelings of lack of self-confidence, difficulties with concentration, sleep problems and difficulties finding social outlets. Of the 41 respondents, six reported thoughts of suicide during the past year. It should also be noted that in each of the categories reported above, the majority of

those who experienced the problem reported the problems to have been most severe during the past two years.

Parent-child relationships appear to be relatively stable with less than 25 percent reporting any difficulties in that area of family functioning.

Of all factors related to the POW, that issue which has been most highly publicized and the subject of considerable speculation has been the divorce statistics of the RPW family. It should be remembered that of the 77 returnees, 38 were married, 34 had never been married, 4 were divorced and one was widowed while in captivity. By 1974, approximately 18 months after their return, the divorce rate was 35 percent for those who were married during their captivity experience. By 1975 the rate had risen to 42.5 and by June 1978 the rate was 52.5. While this rate approximates the national average for divorces, it would be more appropriate to compare this figure with divorce statistics for military personnel. Unfortunately current divorce rates for US Army personnel were not available so this comparison is not made. It might also be noted that of those who were divorced since homecoming, 85 percent have remarried. Of this same group, 8 have divorced twice since homecoming and one had divorced three times. On the positive side, those RPWs who are presently married were asked to report the degree of happiness they experience in their present marriage. Of those responding, 83 percent report a highly satisfactory marital relationship which is close and emotionally rewarding. Of the 34 men who were single at the time of repatriation, 30 have married. Three of the four who were divorced at the time of repatriation have also remarried.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, these findings have presented a brief picture of the current status and social adjustment of a representative sample of Army RPWs. In that no control group exists for this population, observations regarding adjustment cannot be attributed to the captivity experience. Rather, the data must be viewed as descriptive of this specific population. It is, however, believed that, even given the preliminary state of these data, the following should be considered in planning for services for this group:

- 52.5 percent of the original marriages have ended in divorce;
- > 25 percent report financial problems;
- > 55 percent experience job dissatisfaction;
- > 50 percent report feelings of loneliness, health worry, frustration and depression;
- > 30 percent report sleep problems, difficulty with concentration, apathy, and headaches;
- > 15 percent report thoughts of suicide during the past year.

What is probably as significant as the symptomatology reported above is the fact that those reporting indicate these problems have been most severe during the past two years rather than during the initial period following repatriation, as had been anticipated.

What factors are contributing to this apparent increase in perceived social stress are yet to be determined. Several possibilities come to mind as influencing factors. One to be considered is the effect of

cummulative stress in the lives of these men who have experienced trauma, malnutrition, intercurrent infections and psychological stress prior to repatriation followed during the past five years by separation or retirement from the service, increased financial problems, and a high incidence of divorce.

While a number of important medical and research tasks have been accomplished during the past five years, new questions continue to evolve. It is therefore hoped that even though the POW has become less visable and national priorities have changed, we do not lose track of them as individuals with continuing needs. It is obvious that health and social needs do not end at a given five-year period and numerous research questions remain unanswered.

In closing I would like to personally second the recommendations proposed by Dr. Stewart Baker at last year's meeting. That being the implementation of a plan with two operational tracks; one track a continuation of some of the relevant health research studies presently underway, and the other track the continuity and quality assurance of health care for this unique population.

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14 NAVALTHRSCHC - 78-38

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

READ INSTRUCTIONS BEFORE COMPLETING FORM

1. REPORT NUMBER 78-38	2. GOVT ACCESSION NO. AD-A087153	3. RECIPIENT'S CATALOG NUMBER 9
4. TITLE (and Subtitle) (U) Current Status and Social Adjustment of U.S. Army Returned Prisoners of War		5. TYPE OF REPORT & PERIOD COVERED Final rept.
7. AUTHOR(s) Ed/Van Vranken/ MAJOR MSC USA		8. CONTRACT OR GRANT NUMBER(s) 16 F51524
9. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME AND ADDRESS Naval Health Research Center P.O. Box 85122 San Diego, CA 92138		10. PROGRAM ELEMENT, PROJECT, TASK AREA & WORK UNIT NUMBERS 17 ZF51 524 022-0005
11. CONTROLLING OFFICE NAME AND ADDRESS Naval Medical Research & Development Command Bethesda, MD 20014		12. REPORT DATE 7 November 1978
14. MONITORING AGENCY NAME & ADDRESS (if different from Controlling Office) Bureau of Medicine and Surgery Department of the Navy Washington, DC 20372		13. NUMBER OF PAGES 5
		15. SECURITY CLASS. (of this Report) Unclassified
		15a. DECLASSIFICATION/DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE

16. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of this Report)
Approved for public release; distribution unlimited.

17. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of the abstract entered in Block 20, if different from Report)

18. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES
Published in: HP Wetzler (ed), Proceedings, 5th Annual Joint Medical Meeting Concerning POW/MIA Matters, USAF School of Aerospace Medicine. Brooks AFB, Texas: Clinical Sciences Division, December 1979. pp 53-57

19. KEY WORDS (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number)
Prisoners of War
U.S. Army POW

20. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number)
This paper describes the current military status of a random sample of U.S. Army returned prisoners of war and provides a brief summary of the research findings related to their present social adjustment to include their financial, occupational, personal, parent-child, and marital adjustment. Data collection was accomplished between January and September 1978 and was based on information gathered during personal interviews with the individuals. Findings indicate that during the five years since repatriation, 52.5% of the original marriages have ended in divorce. Job dissatisfaction was experienced by 55% of the

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respondents and 50% reported having experienced feelings of loneliness, health worry, frustration and depression. Over 30% reported having experienced sleep problems, difficulty with concentration, feelings of apathy and headaches and approximately 25% reported financial problems. Fifteen per cent reported having had thoughts of suicide during the past year. As significant as the symptomatology reported was the fact that those reporting indicated that the problems had been most severe during the past two years rather than during the initial period following repatriation as had been anticipated.

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